Toradora! Volume3

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Toradora!:Volume3

These are color illustrations that were included in volume 3

とらドラ3!

まさに抱き合わんとしている（ように見える）ところを大河に目撃されてしまった竜児と亜美。みなが固唾を飲んで見守るなか、はたして手乗りタイガーはどうでるのか……？

そして季節は6月、プール開きの季節。実乃梨の水着！　亜美の水着！　そして大河の水着！　と浮かれる間もなく、竜児の身柄をめぐり大河と亜美がなぜか水泳で勝負をすることに。実は泳げない大河は竜児と特訓を開始するが――。

イベント満載のプールシーンに要注目!
どこかヘンな面々が織りなす人気急上昇中の超弩級ラブコメ第3弾！

た-20-5
とらドラ3!
竹宮ゆゆこ
電撃文庫
¥510

ISBN4-8402-3551-1

C0193 ¥510E

MediaWorks

発行●メディアワークス

定価：本体510円

※消費税が別に加算されます

竹宮ゆゆこ（たけみや）

2月24日生まれ、東京在住。たらこの粒の一つ一つがタラになる可能性を秘めていたのかと思うとゾクゾクします。一切れに、タラ数百匹分の可能性……そのタラが生むはずだったたらこ、そのたらこが秘めていた無数のタラの可能性……たらこドリームは無限大だ。

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ！
とらドラ2！
とらドラ3！

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれで千葉県在住。絵描きの友人とルームシェアリングで暮らす計画発動中！　……来年中には何とか！

カバー／暁印刷

高須竜児、高校二年。
不良。ヤンキー。チンピラ予備軍。狂犬高須。窃盗暴行傷害殺人犯。
「うわこええ！　あの目、やっぱり普通じゃねえよ！」
――なんとでもいえ。誤解されるのには慣れている。
原因はこのツラ、この目つき。説明不要の極悪フェイス。単なる遺伝のなせる業だが、理解されるのは難しい。
願うことはただひとつ。穏やかに、心静かに、清潔で安全で規則正しい日々の暮らしを、地味でもきちんと重ねていければいい。それだけでいい。
そんな俺の生活に、奇妙な相方が現われたのは、今年の四月のできごとだった――

とらドラ・ダイジェスト！
竹宮ゆゆこ　イラスト◎ヤス

逢坂大河、高校二年。
凶暴凶悪。最強にして最凶。姿は可憐。極小にして魂は虎。
手乗りタイガーと呼ばれるこの女こそ、俺の静かだった生活の破壊者にして闖入者である。主人ヅラして偉そうに、俺の作るメシで生きているのだ。
親に捨てられ、家事能力皆無、餓死寸前に飢えてた大河を奇跡的に餌付けに成功――したかったわけではないのだが、とある事情が俺たちの縁を、複雑怪奇に結びつけた。
大河の恋と、俺の恋は、それは見事に『交差』していたのだ。

櫛枝実乃梨――俺の片思いの相手。
ユニークで明るくて活発な彼女は、
人嫌いの大河の唯一の親友だった。

北村祐作――大河の片思いの相手。
賢く優しく気のいい優等生は、
俺の一番の親友だった。

不器用で口下手な俺の想いは、いまだ櫛枝へは
届かない。神経質すぎる大河の恋も、北村にはい
まだ受け止めてもらえない。

そんな俺たちの焦げ付きかけた片思いの日々に、
五月のある日、とんでもない爆弾が届けられた。

川嶋亜美

女優を親にもつ、現役高校生モデル。北村の幼馴染の彼女は、季節外れの転校生だった。

「かわいくて優しくて天使みたい！」

「亜美ちゃんって本当に天然だよね～！」

「そこがまた、ちょっとボケてるかわいいんだけど」

「あんなに美人なのに、性格まで最高にいいなんて！」

「やだやだっ、そんなことないってばあ！　みんな、あたしのこと褒めすぎだよ～！」

……なーんてね。

――誰もが賞賛する亜美の本性が、歪みまくりの超腹黒、自己中、意地悪、極悪だとは、誰が知っていただろうか。端的に言えば、亜美は恐るべき二重人格者。鉄の外面をがっぷりかぶったぶりっこ仮面女だったわけだ。

しかもそれを見抜いた大河とは、
当然ながら犬猿の仲。
二人は寄るたび触るたび、ネチネチちくちくと嫌味の応酬、ときには拳も握り合う、血で血を洗う闘争を日々繰り広げているのである。

さらになにを誤解したやら、
「た、か、す、くん♥」——猫撫で声で俺にくっつくことが、大河への嫌がらせになると彼女は信じ込んでいる。
ことあるごとに寄り付き、すり寄り、甘い声で誘惑にかかり……って、ちょっとおい、それはやりすぎなんじゃねえか!?
こら、誤解されるだろうが！　俺を押し倒すんじゃな——

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

とらドラ3

うそ

おーっと、ここでマスクド川嶋、
高須選手をフォールの体勢に入ったぁ！
どう出るか手乗りタイガー、
カットに入るのか!?
それとも高須選手を殺すのかぁ!?
そしてすべてを目撃していたイッコちゃんの
ストレスハゲは、一体どこまで進むんだっ！
試合の続きは次ページからっ！

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

Chapter 1

"It's all your fault!" she said monotonously, yet in a tone dripping with displeasure, causing her low voice to pierce through the quiet corridors of the nighttime emergency room.

"It's all your fault! You're the one who's in the wrong!"

As if to emphasize her point, Aisaka Taiga, sitting alone on the rightmost edge of the sofa, muttered under her breath again.

On the same sofa, sitting as far left as possible, Takasu Ryūji looked down at his own fingernails with his vicious, upturned, razor-sharp eyes. He had arrived early on the conclusion that no matter what he said, he would be wasting his time. Moreover, he didn't have the strength to argue anymore, nor was this the time to do so anyway.

An ambulance drove past the window, the sudden, piercing siren causing Ryūji to jump. The deafening siren cut off abruptly, as if stifled. Only the revolving red light remained; its flashes dragging Ryūji's and Taiga's silhouettes across the linoleum floor. It seemed like the

attached emergency department of the University Hospital was busier than ever, even on weeknights.

"...What time is it?"

Tacking on "I forgot my watch," as if talking to herself, Taiga turned towards Ryūji, her face pale white even in the dark. However, she refused to meet his gaze. Not letting it bother him, Ryūji flipped open his cell phone,

"Just before ten."

He replied curtly. That is to say, it had been nearly an hour already since they had rushed here by taxi. Feeling depressed and unbearably weary, Ryūji subconsciously sighed to himself. Next to him, Taiga sighed as well, and started to twirl her waist-long hair.

Seeing her like this, Ryūji told her, "You should go home first."

He had said this out of concern, as she looked tired, but...

"...needing a dog to be worried about me, I've really fallen far, haven't I? What I want to do is my business, not yours! If you try to order me around again..."

...as her low growl crept along the ground, their surroundings instantly transformed into a jungle that reeked of blood. In the center of this world that she ruled, Taiga cracked her right knuckles noisily. Her eyes that had avoided Ryūji's for nearly an hour now looked straight at him, filled with terrible killing intent and overflowing contempt.

In terms of appearance, Ryūji was her equal - mostly black eyes with a hint of blue, his eyes gave off a knife-like glint as he met Taiga’s stare head on... or so it seemed. In truth, they were nothing more than a physical hereditary trait.

"What’s with that...? Fine, do whatever you want."

Ryūji replied in a small voice. Unable to bear sitting on the same sofa with the wild beast any longer, Ryūji quickly stood up while pretending to remain indifferent.

"...Fuh."

Taiga arrogantly snorted then slid with her bottom towards the center of the monopolized sofa. And then, puffing out her small chest like a king, she coldly thrust her chin upwards.

Even at a time like this, she was the king of the carnivores, the atrocious wild tiger.

With a small, temptingly beautiful face and a delicate body that was so small she didn't seem like a second-year high schooler, she was wearing a flower-patterned one-piece dress that was puffed up with lace and frills, over which her light chestnut brown hair spilled gently down her back. Every aspect of Taiga's being looked so delicate that it was almost too much; her loveliness that resembled a French doll had the elegance of a rose bud. It was unfortunate, but that rose bud was concealing a lethal dose of poison. No, not concealing, but scattering into all directions.

So, this cruel, brutal, and ferocious girl was called the Palmtop Tiger.

After a bunch of stuff happened, the one who had by some miracle been living peacefully with that Palmtop Tiger would be Ryūji, however...

"Haa..."

Stooping down, he rubbed his eyes with both hands. Things had taken a serious turn for the worse.

Ryūji, who normally was calm, was horribly tense right now. After rushing to the hospital in the middle of the night, he could do nothing as he stood around, only able to watch the closed door to the examination room. Keeping them waiting in the dark hallway, the doctor hadn't shown up yet. While not being informed of what sort of treatment was being carried out inside the examination room or how serious the situation was, nor really, anything at all, they waited as time passed. In the still atmosphere that was only disturbed by the two of them breathing, the anxiety filling Ryūji's gut continued to get worse.

"...I...I wonder what's going on..."

Even Taiga's voice that finally broke the silence quickly fell silent again. Making no move to leave despite her displeasure, maybe Taiga felt some of the same anxiety that Ryūji did. Perhaps contrary to her saying "It's all your fault" earlier, she might have felt that she was partly responsible.

I wonder what's going on. Seriously.

If worse comes to worst ... No. He didn't even want to think about it. He subconsciously closed his eyes, and

started shaking his head, as if trying to chase out the worst scenarios from his thoughts when,

"Takasu-san, please come in."

The door to the examination room opened up, and the beckoning voice made him look up hurriedly.

"D-Doctor! How is he, what's his condition?!"

"At any rate, come in."

Stepping quickly into the examination room as he was told, he was blinded for a moment by the strong lights. When his vision that had been blurred white by the brightness could finally distinguish color again, he saw the figure of his feeble family member lying in front of him.

"N...No way...!"

He was unable to feel even a shred of warmth or any other signs of life from that silent body.

Behind him, Taiga also held her breath, falling silent. She took a step back towards the wall.

Laying a hand on the trembling Ryūji, the doctor pointed at the figure lying down peacefully.

"...It's making quite an ugly face, don't you think?"

He poked at the darkened beak with his fingertip.

The tongue that stuck out was a hideous gray tinted with blue that was unbecoming for a parakeet.

"It's still alive."

There was a moment of silence between the two.

"...E, eh?!"

"No way! This thing is definitely dead, isn't it!?"

After Taiga spoke, the doctor, rather, the veterinarian, slowly shook his head. "He's alive. There isn't a thing wrong with his body."

Timidly and with disbelief, Ryūji slowly approached the Takasu residence's most important pet Inko-chan. Inko-chan had been laid down on the table face up, his twig-like legs were entangled sloppily, and he was completely out of it. His mouth, as previously described,

probably warranted a mosaic as it hung open, and both of his opened eyes were completely white. His wings had been somewhat ruffled and, because it was partially open, some unknown juice was oozing out from the tip of his beak. And even though he had been shedding feathers like crazy when they had brought him in, his feathers were still thick, although the odd patch here and there gave him an ugly spotted pattern.

"In...Inko-chan...? It's me. Can you hear me?"

"..."

"Inko-chan! If you're alive, please say something! Answer me, please!"

"..."

Inko-chan, who only looked like a grotesque corpse, was nevertheless rolling around strangely and not replying. The tension in the air seemed to indicate it might be rigor mortis.

"Doctor! He's not responding!"

"...parakeets don't really respond all that much, usually."

"Our Inko-chan does though!"

When Ryūji desperately looked to him with dangerous-looking eyes, the veterinarian silently averted his gaze. He then took three big steps back, to distance himself... *Why is he like this?* Moreover, he had actually gone and called his house pet ugly.

Just as the usually gentle Ryūji was about to lose it,

"Wait a minute, move aside."

Pushing aside Ryūji's shoulder, Taiga briskly stepped up to the medical treatment table.

"If there's no problem with his body then.....in other words, it was a feigned sickness?"

Leaning over the sleeping Inko-chan and looking down at his grotesqueness, Taiga silently looked for confirmation. He couldn't see her face as it was hidden by her drooping hair, but,

"T-Taiga? Wait a minute. What are you trying to do?"

"A feigned illness. It's a feigned illness. Making us worry like this, making us spend two-thousand yen on a

taxi, and we find out he's faking it...how funny. Hey, Ryūji...It's funny, isn't it?"

Except there wasn't a shred of joviality on her face.

"Fuh...If you plan on insisting that you're sick, why don't you just act the part properly? Eh? You ugly bird."

Just then Ryūji saw it.

Inko-chan, who had definitely been motionless before, suddenly batted an eyelid, seemingly out of fear...Taiga should also have seen it.

"...Birds, do they have spines?"

It seemed Inko-chan planned to play dead till the end. As her overly ominous words dissipated,

"Well, even if I say there's no physical problem, it's not necessarily a feigned illness. It could be a problem of the mental nature."

"It came from the top. Or else it came from the bottom. "

Taking to heart the veterinarian's words, it meant that this had been continuing for a while. Stopping, Ryūji's eyes saw drops of water, perspiring faintly from Inko-chan's beak.

This bird species actually perspired.

"Inko-chan! Open your eyes right now!"

"Ryūji back off! It's because you're always spoiling this little parrot's willpower, that he's like this."

The owner's frantic voice cut through Taiga's hands vainly trying to stop the extreme noise, when suddenly,

"I caaan flyyy!"

"Ah, it flew."

.....That said, 'jumped' was more like it. Anyway, it was a mystery of life. Expecting Inko-chan's death, the small voice was startling. PAAN! Inko had also jumped up quite high. Oh! The owner, upon seeing the opened eyes, witnessed the energy that almost hit the ceiling,

"Yaaay! I-Inko-chaaan!"

Inko came clumsily crashing back to the sick bed.

"Oh no!"

Hastily, the veterinarian rushed over, almost squishing Inko-chan, and picked him up to check him for any injuries.

"Stupid...!"

He again saw the immature face turn his away. Ryūji's gaze reached a blaming mood; the veterinarian's face quickly returned back to Inko-chan's body to check him over to make sure nothing was wrong.

"It's alright, there doesn't appear to be any special injury... However... he does seem to have an ugly form, this Inko... Just where did you buy him? Such a thing was sold? ... Inko, just what is he?"

When he had finally finished,

"Wait! Is it alright if I take a picture? My daughter at home would love it very much... This incident... She's still six years old so she's gathering up grotesque images. "

"...Uhh, wouldn't it be dangerous?"

The dear pet was snatched away from the veterinarian's hands; Ryūji softly embraced Inko to his chest. Certainly he was pretty homely. Even so, it wasn't very nice to talk about him that way. But treating him as a gross image was too much. He wasn't going to bring Inko-chan back to this veterinarian again.

The Advanced Emergency Center was part of the university's hospital. Actually, it was next to it.

Ryūji had frantically searched the yellow-pages, made a great deal of phone calls, and finally found a place with nightly medical treatment, which happened to be one of the very few large-scale animal hospitals.

"Well, anyway... It's good that it's not a bad illness. ... Hey, Inko-chan."

Ryūji was, similar to how one would treat a "trophy", softly stroking the top of Inko-chan's head. It didn't seem possible to stomach holding the ugly bird so close. But he was precious.

"Nko-cha nko-cha nko-cha nko.....n.....u.....nko"

"Mm, mm, that's right."

He whispered into Inko-chan's ear, treating him like a spoiled child. Without realizing it, his lips were touching the side of Inko-chan's head, cooing.

"That was close. In the end you weren't hurt from when Taiga almost killed you. ...Geez, she really likes to yell out in anger."

"Whaaat?"

She hadn't heard clearly because the words to the bird were said in a small voice.

"...You heard?"

"I heard. Whose outburst of anger?"

The insane sense of hearing Taiga possessed was very irritating! She then struck the examining table with her fist,

"...Wh-Wh-Wh, Wha, What's with this."

With her aberrant blunder of clumsiness, as usual, the force of the strike turned over the tray of medical

examination utensils, causing any and everything to spread out over the sick bed.

"Aah, aah! I just disinfected those... You two, just how long are you going to stand there now that Inko doesn't have an illness? You're starting to really stress me out."

Taiga started to collect and organize the spilled utensils. The appearance of the tired veterinarian on duty was comparable with Ryūji and Taiga's own countenances.

"You guys must quarrel like this a lot, huh? Pets are surprisingly receptive, so that's why when the owners become cranky, the pet will pick up on it and suffer as well."

From beside Ryūji, who acknowledged those words and was turning himself around,

"What do you mean, quarreling?"

With a "Hah!" Taiga shrugged her shoulders, spread both her hands out like a foreigner, and laughed from the tip of her nose at the veterinarian's words.

"It’s just that this perverted dog's brain is controlled by his body's lower half, so he goes around making trouble based on his impossible delusions, thus needing ' correction' on what is okay to think about. Most people would pretend to not know, but I myself cannot stand someone constantly making an idiot of themselves. Hohoho."

Being insulted to that extent, Ryūji was unable to remain silent.

"...Huh? Don’t say whatever suits you. Geez, it’s because of your screaming and yelling that this weak guy is unable to take it."

But, Ryūji's actions were exactly what people would call "impulsive", or maybe "foolhardy". Although to put it more bluntly, perhaps he had "said too much".

"Ehhh, so you aren’t listening to my kind 'correction' at all! Ohhh... in that case, why don't we say everything clearly? Explain why you think I am venting my anger on Inko! Just what am I so angry with? I have no idea at all! If it’s convenient, would you mind telling me!?"

The Palmtop Tiger's advancing inner eyes, which held a strong killing intent, continued to creep forward bit by bit. Ryūji fearfully held his breath, but only for a moment ; if he was going to die anyway, he might as well let it all out.

"You too, if you have something to say, then say it! To have that kind of bad expression is irritating and really odious!"

There was a moment of silence.

Within the stillness, Taiga slowly lifted her right hand to her right ear, leaned her body in towards Ryūji's mouth, tilted her chin and placed her left hand on her waist.

"~Well?"

The response was a single word.

I couldn't hear, I didn't understand, and moreover I have no interest in anything you want to say... In this wide, wide world, who else could be so incredible as to be able to express so many thoughts with just a tilt of the chin?

"L-look here..."

Unable to respond properly, Ryūji slumped his shoulders. Even in this situation, Taiga wouldn't let him off easy, and with a snort Taiga lifted her jaw, completely ignoring the thirty centimeter height difference as she looked down on Ryūji. She then opened her mouth with the air of a king,

"You know Ryūji, I'll take this chance to tell you clearly , I'm just clearly stating the circumstances but, I don't have the time to keep company with an idling dog like you. From now on, when you're going to open your mouth to me, think carefully about these three things. One, is it necessary information? Two, is it good news? Three, is it something worth hearing? ...do you understand?"

"U—understand stupid! What's with that wild idea!? Speaking of your cruel words, it's a fact that you're the one who pouts and blows up!"

"...Is that so."

Taiga's voice hid her feelings. The two pupils that were suspended in the corner of her eyes were giving off a bizarre glare, and having lost all circular reason, the

pupils narrowed swiftly. Dangerous, with the typical instinct of fear, Ryūji's stomach twisted in knots. To the spirits of small, righteous men and women, the eyes of Taiga could send them on to Ascension. However, the dreadful thing was that her voice remained as calm as a ripple on a pond.

"You've said way too much. You've done nothing but make me upset."

And the like.

Like a dead person coming forth from the house's door striking their fairy's hands, Taiga's hands were dancing about. '**Gakki!**' With unbelievable force, Ryūji's lower lip gripped a finger.

"N, nnngu."

"But you know, the reason why I don't see this as funny... There's just one. You always have stupid ideas. I am sick of you constantly making these indecipherable reckless remarks."

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! GET OFF!"

"JUST GET OFF!"

Identifying with Ryūji, who was being swung all about while held by his lower lip, Inko-chan began to shed feathers again. Speaking with a tired moan, the veterinarian told them both,

"Just go home".

You’re in a bad mood.

No, I'm not.

Then why do you look so irritated?

Because you're saying stupid things like "You’re in a bad mood."

It was unknown how many times this loop had continued from its beginning. Let's jump back five hours.

Basically, he was being teased by Ami.

Ryūji wasn't such a naive guy that he wouldn't understand that much at the very least. So, while he was surprised, he went along with it and the scene which unfolded under the quietly encroaching twilight in the 2DK apartment was a part of their bad joke.

Between Takasu Ryūji and Kawashima Ami, from the trifling sequence of events, a little distance had closed between them... It might be from the two holding each other, over by the window. To say more, it looked like a position where one had been pushed down onto the tatami mats.

However, the first eyewitness was Ryūji's mother Yasuko, who hadn't thought that it was a joke. Dropping the shopping bag she had been holding in both hands, she lectured her son; however, most of it never reached Ryūji's ears.

"...No way..."

It came from behind Yasuko.

From the doorway, supported by Ryūji's close friend Kitamura, who was covered in mud, Taiga's clear voice showed her mind processing the situation.

Taiga and Ami were natural enemies, so the combination of Ami and the misunderstanding unalterably caused them to look bad, thought Ryūji. And so the Tiger's wrath exploded.

A simple chastising was not enough as Taiga had reached the limit of her outrage. There was no doubt the apartment would be destroyed. Rather, it was quite possible that this time she really would kill. At any rate, Taiga was the Palmtop Tiger, so something like that would be easy to accomplish with her potential.

"T-This is...not what it looks like."

Pushing off Ami's body, he had detached himself and was sitting Japanese style when his words had exited miserably from his throat. This fickle guy however, shouldn't have spoken.

Taiga opened her eyes wide, taking in the sight of Ryūji and Ami. Of course, at that time, rather than thinking up a good explanation on Ryūji's behalf,

"Ara? Is something wrong? Ami-chan, could this be really bad timing?"

Ami whispered and went "hehe

" as if nothing was wrong... She was smiling.

"Uhhm, uhhm."

Desperately trying to understand the situation, Yasuko was continuously twisting her fingers around,

"Uhhhmm."

She was still repeating this in confusion. Subconsciously scratching her head, she still hadn't figured it out.

Kitamura shifted.

With an unreadable expression on his face, Kitamura backed away without a word... He retreated just like that. Taiga let him carry her on his back as he wished. He was dripping of mud from having fallen in the drain, and his glasses were bent out of shape. Continuing to retreat, he emerged outside, leaving Ryūji's field of vision and giving him only a moment to think when,

"...Unme!"

Letting go of Kitamura's shoulders, Taiga grabbed the top of the entrance hall doorway with both hands. With both feet entwined around his lower back like the claw of a crane game machine, Kitamura's body was suspended in order to stop his movement.

"A, Aisaka! What the...!"

"...Kitamura-kun, why are you trying to escape? You were going to borrow Ryūji's shower, right? There's no need to run away."

Even so perhaps Taiga's greatest concern was that Kitamura's body would twist out and seize the door frame, so Taiga was exhibiting inhuman strength in holding onto the door frame and suspending Kitamura's body in the air. Clamping with a great force, blood from the knees was pumping through the two beautiful legs.

"...Uhm, excuse me, Taiga-chan, according to Ya-chan's calculations, well, Ryū-chan, let me see...ah, ah, ah..."

Yasuko lightly shook her breasts, which were not contained in a bra, unsure of what she wanted to say. Taiga quickly passed by Yasuko's side, walking towards Ami and Ryūji who were seated next to each other. Ryūji

held his breath. The mud from the ditch was stuck all over her hair and face, and from a crack in the mud, an eye peeked out like a glass sphere. Surely, staring at Ryūji and Ami was the glare of a calm, robot murderer.

As Taiga stopped right in front of the two, Ryūji watched her face that seemed to be stiffly shaking.

And then...

"Takasu Ryūji is mine! Don't touch as you please!"

The unbelievable outcry took everyone's breath away. However it was only for a moment. Under the glass eye's scrutiny, everything seemed to melt away.

"...Did you think I was going to say something like that ?"

From beside the speechless Ryūji, maybe he should have expected it or something, but,

"Hmm? You're not saying that~? How funny~, n-o-t."

Commenting as such in this circumstance, Ami pouted cutely while looking genuinely unafraid.

"Hunn... I don't need to say anything like that, do I? You must be disappointed, Ami Kawashima. Sorry, but I really don't care who this perverted dog tries to get it on with."

Kukuku. ...She turned a bitter smile in Ami's direction but wasn't willing to turn her contemptuous glance towards Ryūji. Taiga turned her body around,

"By all means proceed at your leisure. Because I'm going back home. Kitamura-kun, I wasn't able to tell you earlier, but my apartment is very close to here. Even though you took the trouble to bring me here, I'm going to go take a shower at my house."

After speaking in such a relaxed and disinterested manner to Kitamura, Taiga briskly headed out of the Takasu residence.

Finally after everything had ended, Ami said, "My contact lens came off but Takasu-kun found it." Lying, Ami blinked her eyes, and Yasuko and Kitamura came to an understanding. After finishing his shower, Kitamura took Ami back home, and somehow, a peaceful mood had been restored.

Taiga had "as always," returned to pick up a meal, which was when the situation began to fall apart at the seams.

This was Yasuko’s chance.

"This is great, Taiga-chan! Just now, I was wondering if you were still bothered and not coming over for dinner ." Yasuko gave a small smile as she chatted while preparing to go to work, like she usually did. Taiga laughed. Except that she laughed while facing only the TV. "Of course I'd come over. Why would you think I wasn't coming? That's too strange, that's so funny, this joke's really not bad. What would anyone think I would be bothered by?"

She held her temper while she talked to Yasuko, on account of her being the head of the house. However... " Oh, that's right. How annoying, I totally forgot! Ryūji, looks like you got all horny today? Haha! Do whatever you want. By the way, what are we eating tonight? Jambalaya? Why not red bean rice? Ohohohoho!" Taiga laughed with one hand on her waist and the other by her

mouth. There was no laughter in her eyes, however. They were opened wide, killing intent emanating impatiently.

This meant, after all, that some explanation had to be given. This was what Ryūji thought while preparing dinner in the kitchen. Of course, somewhere in his head, he was thinking, *Why do I have to explain myself to her? Taiga doesn't need a reason to run off.* As this ran through his head,

"Umm.....Taiga?"

This and that were two different things.

Taiga was a girl under normal circumstances, but when she turned into the Palmtop Tiger, the majority of this world wouldn't be able to stand up to her anger. Loathing having to make friends with Kawashima Ami, she was probably feeling guilty. She could see her appearance best.

"Ah... Ah... Ah, you seem rather relaxed. Don'tcha, you ugly bird! Hohoho!"

Taiga was squatting on the floor and holding Inko-chan's cage with both hands, while from her back a murderous intent could be seen flashing like blue sparks. It seemed Taiga was spitting mad.

For the sake of an amiable living atmosphere, it is sometimes necessary to apologize, even when you've done nothing wrong. So Ryūji opened his mouth once again.

"Taiga..."

"...What do you want?"

Ryūji walked up to her and lightly poked her back. Taiga's "Hohoho" 'laughter' immediately stopped, and the only sound left in the Takasu residence was the hair dryer that Yasuko was using.

"How should I say this? About the situation this afternoon..."

"'Situation?' What situation? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Taiga coldly stood with her back towards him. Confronted with this, Ryūji seemed to back away a little.

"I was mocked by Kawashima. I'm sure you could tell, it's just that... How should I say this, for putting you in a bad mood, I am sorry."

"Hiiii..."

Inko-chan suddenly whimpered. He lifted his head and stared at that which Ryūji could not see – Taiga's expression. He started to back away, only to lose his grip and fall from his wooden perch.

"Why do you need to apologize? Oh, that's right! Today I'm going to eat while watching this ugly bird. Hand me my rice bowl."

With her back still towards Ryūji, Taiga stretched out a hand, asking for her bowl. Her expression only visible to Inko-chan.

"What about the side dishes...? We have roast fish today... Alfonsino ..."

"Put them on the rice. Don't use a normal rice bowl. Use an extra large one. Also sprinkle some vinegar on it."

Thus Taiga silently ate with her back facing towards the dining table. Yasuko and Ryūji didn't dare to speak, and so just ate quietly.

"Ya, Ya-chan, needs to go to work now~"

Today, Yasuko left earlier than normal. That was to say, she ran away.

Left behind was Ryūji, and one who planned to act as if "everything was normal" and lazily kill time in the Takasu's residence, Taiga. Inside the house, the only sound was the empty echo from the television. Taiga stared at Inko-chan, still as a statue.

Ryūji grit his teeth and stood up, lightly picking up the birdcage from the side into his arms.

"..."

Flash! Taiga's beautiful eyes glinted, and stared silently at Ryūji.

"I think... it's almost time to cover up Inko-chan's cage, to let him sleep."

"Why? Don't you usually do it later?"

"No reason... just... look, Inko-chan looks really tired."

"I want to keep watching him, put him down here."

Taiga extended her snow white hand and grabbed the birdcage from below. The birdcage swayed a bit and the water inside spilled a little.

"Why? You don't usually have special interest in Inko-chan, right?"

"Why can't I? Is it bad? Strange? Or bothersome?"

Neither of them spoke, each trying to pull the birdcage towards themselves.

"Fine! I get it. I understand what you mean, just give Inko-chan to me first!"

Taiga's eyes narrowed even further.

"Get what? What do you mean you 'understand'? What have you understood? What exactly are you trying to say?"

Inko-chan's birdcage was still stuck between them, and the air in the house swiftly fell to the freezing point.

"Um, that is... I already know you're angry..."

"I'm angry? You're talking about me? Do I look angry? Why would I be angry!? Probably because you think I saw you and Kawashima Ami flirting, and so as a result, I became irritated, jealous, angry, and so you wanted to apologize. Was that what you wanted to say? That I'm a tragic girl, and you're extremely popular among the ladies, worthy of my jealousy. Was that what you wanted to say?"

Taiga said all she wanted to say in one breath, then slowly stood up and stepped forward. Ryūji hugged the birdcage to his chest and subconsciously stepped back, but behind him was the wall... This was the trouble of 38 square meters.

"C-calm down, that wasn't what I meant. I just wanted a peaceful, tranquil life..."

"Didn't you say it just now, that I was angry? You said I was 'unhappy'? That's what you've been saying all this time, right? I'm obviously the same as usual. It's just that you keep saying I must be angry, right? If you want me to be angry so much, then I'll show you angry! It's not easy to be angry! Because I fell in a ditch, injured my knee, wanted to cry my heart out and also stank so badly , and then my horrible appearance was seen by

Kitamura-kun, and I even had him carry me on his back... and in the end, when I was like this, you were actually f-f-flirting with that repugnant female...!"

Taiga stepped forward again, wrinkled up her nose, and stared at Ryūji fiercely, like a bloodthirsty predator. A pair of eyes shone with the light of anger, and the corner of her pale lips twisted in such a way that it seemed to be smiling sweetly.

"But the thing that angers me the most, is that you thought so highly of yourself as to imagine that you could form conclusions on what I was thinking! You've insulted me! Hey, are you listening?!"

Taiga stood on tiptoe, and lifted her chin, almost as if she was kissing with her lover. Her voice however, was filled with previously unknown cold malice.

"Why do I have to be angry over who you get together with? Whoever you choose to wag your tail to doesn't concern me one bit!"

You really are angry. If he said that, he'd most likely have been killed. So even if he had more things he wanted to say, Ryūji kept his mouth shut. This choice was probably best.

"..."

"Starting from now, you're not allowed to say these meaningless things. This is also for your own good!"

Taiga once again looked at Ryūji with contempt in her eyes, drew back from him, and said while turning around,

"Originally I didn't really care about what happened today, but because of your idiotic words, I am now irritated. I'm going home."

Just when she had put on her socks and stepped across the tatami mats towards to entrance,

"...119..."

Who said that? 119... Shibuya? No, that's 109... Actually, whose voice was that...? Could it possibly be, Inko-chan? In a tear-jerking bid to escape from this painful reality, Ryūji quickly looked at the birdcage in his hands.

"Woah!"

Ryūji couldn't help yelling, and at the same time realized *119, that's the emergency ambulance number!*

Hearing Ryūji's holler, Taiga, who had jumped and turned round abruptly also released a surprised sound.

"Yiyi!?"

She quickly ran to Ryūji to look at the birdcage.

"No way! It couldn't be because of the shaking earlier, could it?"

Inside the birdcage, the pitiable victim earlier used as an arguing tool had already started shedding feathers. It was unclear if the reason was because its whole body had seized up and fell off its perch, or if it was because of a sudden lapse in judgment. Anyway, Inko-chan's head was now stuck in between the bars of the cage.

Taiga's nearly sobbing sounds of "It's over, it's over, what do we do?!" and Ryūji's stricken shrieking of "Call an ambulance! No wait, a vet!" mixed to form a funeral march.

Takasu Inko, lived a full 6 years... It can't be, right?

"Hey! What the hell... That taxi just now was obviously empty..."

Ryūji stared menacingly at the taillights of the taxi that had failed to stop, and before he realized it, he had made a gesture saying "You bastard!". That was already the second taxi that didn't pick them up

Since the two of them left the animal hospital and reached the taxi-void main road, it had already been 10 minutes.

"It's not because we're high school students, right?

"Wouldn't it be because your face is too scary?"

Taiga sat on the safety railings while holding Inko-chan, who had just returned from a near-death experience. She watched with boredom at the speeding traffic.

"Forget it. Let's just walk a little until we get to the crossroads over there! I think there should be more taxis over there just leaving the train station..."

"Fuh..." After Taiga gloomily exhaled a puff of air and prepared to jump off, she unexpectedly let out a startled sound. "Uwah!" It turns out that a frill from her one-piece dress had gotten caught in the crevice of the railings.

"Really... What are you doing?!"

Taiga frowned, and seemed ready to rip the dress away. Ryūji from the side yelled out frantically,

"Hey hey, the dress will tear! Pull lightly!"

Ryūji knelt at the roadside, and prepared to gently pull out the frill of the 100,000 yen dress when,

"How annoying!"

Accompanied by a sharp ripping sound, the thin fabric of the dress tore in the direction of Taiga's yanking. She then stuffed the box holding the birdcage into Ryūji's hands, and turned her angry face away.

"I can't stand this..."

"Hm... Certainly, there are a few points that deserve our reflection... In the end, it was all because of our

pointless argument that Inko-chan became like this. Hey, Ryūji, it's partly your fault as well. It's all because of your wild imagination, thinking stupid things like 'Taiga is angry' and whatnot."

"Huh?"

Taiga hadn't turned round, so her self-mumbling wasn't understandable. Ryūji ran up and walked parallel to her, stealing glances at Taiga's facial expressions.

Taiga continued,

"It's true I haven't been compassionate..."

Hear hear, Ryūji nodded.

"I just thought it was funny, and definitely didn't lose my temper. I'm serious here, from the bottom of my hea~rt! Since your business has nothing to do with me."

"..."

At that moment in Ryūji's heart, weariness presided over anger; he had no more strength to complain, and just gazed at Taiga's face. Taiga brushed away the hair in her way and smiled faintly at Ryūji.

"Then I'll be leaving first. I, for one, don't want to walk shoulder-to-shoulder with a perverted dog!"

... That was a cruel thing to say...

That most probably phony smile turned away, and Taiga silently walked slowly into the dark night's mist. Her retreating back's body language sent a clear message - whoever dares to block me, I'll stare him to death.

In the end, Taiga did manage to flag down a taxi. Even though they were neighbors, Ryūji didn't want to sit in the same car, but a loud "Stop dawdling and get in the taxi!" swiftly dashed his hopes. With heavy footsteps, as if he was walking towards his execution, Ryūji uneasily sat beside Taiga. Taiga kept silent the whole drive, until the taxi arrived exactly between the Takasu residence and the Taiga residence.

Taiga automatically paid the fare without even a glance at Ryūji, and walked into the apartment building's entrance. Ryūji had planned to pay himself...

It had already been 5 hours since that incident, and the situation was getting worse and worse.

* * *

Argh, I can't stand it! It's maddening!

What exactly did I do wrong, why did the situation turn to this? I can't stand it, can't stand it, can't stand it! Once it's morning, I'll definitely fall victim to Taiga's irritation, and once we're at school, Taiga and Ami will definitely meet, and her anger will be blown up to even larger proportions, right?

I don't want this. I don't want this. I don't want this. Maybe because he couldn't sleep well, Ryūji spent the whole night moaning.

"...Eh...Eh? Ehh!?" Ryūji wondered why he couldn't hear his alarm clock, and slowly opened his eyes to look at the clock.

"EHHHHH!!!"

Foomph! The covers flew up. The numbers "8:05" made it past his eyelids, and his brain awoke in an

instant. The cold, cruel reality circulated non-stop in Ryūji's head.

"Shit, shit, shit..."

Oversleeping for an hour, at this rate my attendance is in trouble! First, the toilet...But while trying to take off his T-shirt at the same time, Ryūji fell into a mess. *What to do ? What to do? What to do?*

"Oh no! Taiga!"

Ryūji remembered Taiga—that person would never be up unless Ryūji woke her. If he had to go over to wake her, by the time she changed, they would definitely be late.

There was no other choice. It was finally time to use his secret weapon. Ryūji had been prepared a long time ago for a situation like this. He took from the cupboard the scarcely used broom — if he had this, he could awake Taiga.

Ryūji opened the window of the room, trying not to look down while stepping onto the window sill with one

foot, and stepped onto the separating wall between the buildings with his other. He then extended the hand holding the brush, and began smacking the window.

"Taiga! Wake up! We've overslept!"

On the other side of the window was Taiga's bedroom. Thump-thump-thump-thump! But there was no sign of Taiga waking up. *She wouldn't have left me alone and gone to school herself, right?* It was possible. At this point Ryūji started to waver. *After we went head to head yesterday, if I woke her up today as normal, what would her reaction be? Or should I not wake her, and let her continue sleeping... No no no , if I don't wake her, the situation will become even worse...*

I'll try one more time! If she isn't here, then there's nothing I can do. This is the last time. Ryūji once again thrust the long brush.

"What the heck... do you... Ah!"

"Ah!!!"

The apartment's window suddenly flew open without warning, and the handle of the brush loudly made

contact on the forehead of an annoyed face. As if she was in a manga, Taiga fell backwards like a domino, disappearing from Ryūji's field of vision.

"Tai, Taiga!!! Get a hold of yourself!"

After a while...

"It hurts like... like hell..."

Pulling herself up using the window sill, Taiga looked like she was about to cry. Even though her whimpering face was cute, this wasn't the time to think about this.

"S, sorry! I overslept, it's already past eight!"

"Eh...? Huh? Why? It hurts... a lot..."

The half-asleep Taiga rubbed her eyes and sniffed like a little child. She wiped her hands, wet with her directly onto her pure white summer pajamas.

She hadn't seem to have grasped the situation yet, and stuck her face into her messy hair.

"What's for breakfast...? Why did you wake me up like this today...?"

She seemed to have forgotten that she was angry. She hadn't lost her temper yet, either... Was this luck?

"Neither breakfast nor the bentous have been prepared ! Go wash your face, brush your teeth, and get changed! It's an emergency! If we don't leave in five minutes we're going to be late!"

"...Mmm..."

It was unclear whether she understood or not. Taiga blinked again.

"Mm..."

She nodded. *Then I'll treat that as if she understood.* Ryūji safely returned to his room.

"Hey, faster! Shut the window! That's right! Close, and lock! Just like that!"

Ryūji confirmed that Taiga had closed the window, and started to change... Speaking of which, he realized that he had stepped out to speak with Taiga just wearing his boxers.

"Lucky she wasn't fully awake yet... More importantly, lucky no one else saw. I was probably half-asleep myself, right?"

Ryūji quickly jumped into his summer uniform trousers, and buttoned up his short-sleeved shirt... *Teeth should be properly brushed, but the face just needs a quick splash of water.*

Just when he was flipping through his drawers for his socks,

"Oh, Inko-chan's and Yasuko's birdfeed, food and water... but there's no time!"

He could only leave behind a note asking his mother to take care of Inko-chan and herself. Next was to uncover the cage.

"Ahh!"

After Inko-chan had gotten back from the veterinarian, the parakeet had been so tired that he had wobbled from side to side, and was now sleeping obliviously. Balancing

on his perch, just barely fluffing his few remaining feathers, he slept in his normal position, as his white eyes stared blankly up from out of his ugly sleeping face.

"I'm really sorry about yesterday. Sleep well..."

Just when Ryūji couldn't help but putting his palms together.

"Inko-chan... died...? Uwah~~!"

Beside the birdcage was Yasuko, originally sleeping soundly in her alcohol-induced stupor. She had suddenly woken up, started crying, and was now rolling on the floor towards the corner of the room.

"...Zzzz..."

Reaching the bottom of the cupboard, she once again started peacefully snoring.

"N, nonsense... He's not dead yet!"

Yasuko probably couldn't hear him, but Ryūji still answered honestly, and lightly covered her up with a blanket. He then hurriedly put on his socks, grabbed his bag, and flew out the door.

Even though the street was blanketed by a light cover of fog, the sunlight was still shining brightly. Ryūji squinted his pair of vicious eyes and ran towards the neighboring apartment building entrance.

He pressed repeatedly on the numbers "201" on the automatic lock, but there was no response. Just when Ryūji was becoming as panicky as an ant on a frying pan,

"Shhhhhhut UP!"

The glass door opened silently, and a grumbling Taiga came out.

"You're already awake!"

"Wasn't it you who woke me up!? My forehead hurts like hell...!"

Snap! With unbelievable speed Taiga whipped her head around to face Ryūji. That fleeting glance was full of fury and contempt.

"Uwah..." Even though she wasn't fully awake, she still remembered what happened. Ryūji felt a cold shiver run down his spine as he exited the building alongside Taiga.

It was the middle of the rainy season and the grass was fragrant, as the two dashed under a grove of trees.

"Taiga, we have to first go to a convenience store or there'll be no lunch!"

"..."

"T, Taiga? Did you hear me?"

"..."

"Ow...don't kick me there!"

"..."

"We're not aligned! Lowlife of a perverted dog! I heard you say convenience store!"

Ryūji understood. It seemed as though if one wanted to communicate with Taiga today, one would either have to yell really loudly, or completely ignore her attitude.

Taiga's bad mood and her venomous attitude towards him was a normal everyday thing, but he still felt that her attitude today was a few times more violent than usual. Was it because of the way he had woken her up

this morning? Or because he overslept? Ryūji tried to make sense of it all, but it felt like he was tricking himself ... As expected, however he thought about it, he still felt that Taiga was still angry about what happened yesterday.

Hmph! Taiga once again turned her head, biting the inside of her cheek, avoiding Ryūji's eyes. *Ah.. Ah...Will I have to suffer her irritation outbursts again, like yesterday?* Ryūji started to feel depressed.

"Black nipples..."

"Huh?!"

In the midst of sprinting haphazardly, Ryūji thought he could hear the sound of Taiga muttering through her grinding teeth,

"Your black nipples are still stuck in my retina. How infuriating...!"

That was to say, the reason behind Taiga's irritation today was Ryūji's nipples. It had absolutely nothing to do with what happened yesterday. "Because your business is none of my business anyway", simple as that.

"They weren't... weren't that black, right...?"

"Black! My eyeballs have been invaded by your nipples! Pitch black!"

Yeah, it was unbelievable but during his 16th summer, Takasu Ryūji discovered a new reason to feel ashamed of his body.

They reached the crossroads where Minori usually waited. But with only a few minutes before the bell, even Ryūji's heartwarming goddess had left already.

"Ah, you're finally here~~! Thanks for your help yesterday!"

They made it safely into the classroom in the nick of time.

"Oh my, you know your hair still looks like you slept on it? Did you oversleep today?"

Standing before Ryūji was, an archangel who forgot to bring her wings, shining with a clear brilliance - on the

outside that is. In actuality, she's a chihuahua with a really bad personality. "She" was none other than Kawashima Ami. Her large, watery eyes shone like jewels. Using her snow-white arms, she flicked Ryūji's cowlick, which had formed while he slept last night.

"So Takasu-kun oversleeps too!"

Ami used her perfect smile she uses specifically for modeling shots (pouting, then widening her eyes and leaning slightly forward to place emphasis on her cleavage), and said: "How cute!

"

"..."

"Oh? What's the matter~?"

Even if you ask me "What is the matter~?", what can I say! Ryūji felt very subtle and chose not reply to her morning greeting. *It looks like Ami intends to mess around with me with that angel mask today as well. Even though she gave herself away long ago, and showed others her dark side, does she think that putting on that artificial front will still work? What a joke!* While thinking this, Ryūji tried to figure out how he should reply to Ami.

"Ah, don't misunderstand please. Of course I did not mean that Takasu-kun is cute, but I mean myself, Ami-chan! Takasu-kun is still like normal, the type that one would know just by looking at his face!"

"The, the type that one would know just by looking at his face!"

Ami used her hand to form a V, placed at the side of her eyes:

"110

"

"Sigh..." Rushing to school had sapped most of his energy, so Ryūji couldn't help but sigh heavily. *What to do? I have the looks of a wanted criminal!*

"Tricked..."

"Ohoho? What's the matter~~?"

Behind Ami's smiling eyes were her true intentions. It seemed to Ryūji that she was a black-hearted chihuahua with a bad personality.

"Acting up so early in the morning... Take care not to get a face cramp."

"I am a professional, I am not that dumb~~"

Ami's masked slipped for a brief moment, as she stuck her tongue out at Ryūji, but immediately recovered the smiling mask of a beautiful, helpless girl.

"..... Pff!"

"You were in the way, stupid chihuahua."

Behind Ryūji was the Palmtop Tiger, who caused the beautiful female to moan helplessly. It seemed that she had used slightly more force than a passing greeting would require to hit Ami's stomach with the corner of her bag.

"Argh... Aisaka-san, you seem to be in a really bad mood this morning...?"

"Morning, Kawashima-san. To start having heats so early in the morning, it must be tough for you."

Taiga's eyes darted between Ami and Ryūji. She then turned around, leaving behind a cold stare.

"Oh! That's right!"

Ami clapped and shouted,

"Aisaka-san, sorry but are you still bothered by what happened yesterday? So sorry, but that is just a misunderstanding! Aisaka-san just made a mistake! But, just that and you are so jealous? Oh my! Jealousy, and envy, this is so unlike Aisaka-san! Ah ah~~ What a headache... All because I am so scatterbrained. That is why I always do things that may cause misunderstandings..."

"..."

Taiga stopped in her tracks. Turning around slowly,

"So you don't get it either, do you woman?"

Her lips were twisted into a vicious smile, tinged with the stench of blood and full of murderous intent. Just like the message from the Grim Reaper, her speech drew in a whirling mass of dark clouds to the area, creating a maleficent atmosphere. Then,

"That whole thing, I'm not even the slightest bit bo..."

"Hyuppah!"

Suddenly, Taiga floated into the air. It was like she'd mastered levitation... As Ryūji stood dumbfounded with his mouth open, out from beside Taiga's uplifted slender frame popped a brilliant face with a genuinely sunny smile.

"Mo~~rning! Taiga and Takasu-kun both just barely made it on time~!"

"Mi, Minorin... Put me down."

Grasping the diminutive Taiga from behind by her underarms, the one who easily lifted her overhead...

"You know Taiga, you're rather light, aren't you? I wonder why that is? Even though you eat all the same things I do~."

"Stop using me as a free-weight."

...was none other than Kushieda Minori. Mumbling " But then my arms might get weak" while lifting Taiga up and down, her smiling face was the embodiment of perfect health, the very light of the sun, and in Ryūji's opinion, the most perfect girl in the world.

The switch to the summer uniform was readily revealing her supple figure, so Ryūji was stuck instinctively averting his gaze. After suffering Taiga's vile treatment ever since yesterday night, Ryūji found Minori's utter sweetness to be almost too much to bear. In a panic trying to slow his racing heart, he glanced off to the side. It wasn't that he had gone berserk or anything , just that he was overwhelmed.

Minori, on the other hand, wasn't paying attention to Ryūji's odd behavior,

"Actually, Kawashima-san is also quite slender, right? Have you still been running recently?"

She was just quickly searching out other people's arm fat. This sort of situation, it's what people called ' unrequited love'.

"Phew..." Ryūji secretly let out a sad sigh. He wondered when, if ever, Minori would take notice of his feelings for her. That he'd been thoroughly admiring her all this time...

"For some reason, you two don't look so well. Ah, could it be, Taiga and Takasu-kun overslept, so you didn 't eat breakfast? In that case, you're in luck because I brought some snacks. Here, eat these."

It was hard to tell if she was dense or actually well in tune with others, but Minori pulled a small zip-lock bag from her pocket, dug into it and declared,

"THE black nipple!"

Holding a raisin in each hand, she brought them up to her own bust top.

"I've got plenty, so eat all you want!... Huh? Takasu-kun, why're you so depressed?"

Placing a firm hand on Minori's shoulder, the one to answer her was Taiga.

"Right now, Ryūji's ego has become a mapless wanderer stuck between his projected self-image and cold hard reality."

"Ho~! That's quite something. Good luck Takasu-kun! Swing hard and bring it home! Or something!"

Gently handing over the right black nipple to the shoulder-slumped Ryūji, Minori turned about and made Ami take the left one.

"Kawashima-san, I really want to apologize for yesterday! I reflected on my actions! I was even the one who offered the idea, but I really had no choice but to leave for my part-time job... I'm sorry. Are you okay? I heard from Kitamura just a while ago that you guys succeeded in taking care of the stalker, right?"

"There's no need to apologize! Yeah, at least for now, I'm doing all right! I should be thanking you, I'm really

grateful for all that Minori-chan's done for me. I'll accept this black nipple too!"

Continuing on, Minori once again faced Taiga and Ryūji,

"I want to apologize to Taiga and Takasu-kun too."

"Don't worry about it Minorin, you couldn't help it after all."

"I really am sorry."

Bending her slender back, she bowed her head repeatedly. Her brow that was furrowed in a sincere heartfelt apology and her pure eyes that were looking up at him immediately rescued Ryūji from his nipple worries. He was too nervous to speak, but discreetly looking up at Minori's face, Ryūji waved his hand. He was trying to say, "Don't worry about it." Understandingly, Taiga followed up with an interpretation for him.

"Ryūji's also saying you don't need to worry. Right, Ryūji?"

As he nodded, he was thinking that for her to help out at a time like this even though they were fighting, Taiga really was a good person... At least for a little while, he had such a favorable opinion of her.

"Hey, Minorin. It was really a stroke of luck for Ryūji that you left in the middle of things. Kitamura and I fell into a ditch and we called off the mission, but because of that, Ryūji ended up alone with Kawashima, and he brought her to his house, and..."

"Wa~~h!"

What the heck is she saying?!! Practically on instinct, Ryūji quickly leaped to cover her mouth, but it wasn't enough as she pulled his fingers away from her mouth to escape,

"Last night at the Takasu house, the two of them were getting all close and,"

"Ah~~!"

"Black nip-!"

Hyuppah! In a desperate effort to shut her up, he thrust his hands to grasp Taiga by her warm underarms and just like Minori had done earlier, lifted her up with all his strength. The light Taiga quickly rose into the air,

"Gyaaah?! Let me go, you perverted dog!"

"Like I'd let go with you yelling so loudly!"

And so moving about, when they turned around,

"Oh, morning Aisaka-san!"

"...!"

Practically nose-to-nose with Taiga, Kitamura Yūsaku raised one hand in a congenial greeting, and just like that , all the fight went out of Taiga's body. She even forgot about belittling Ryūji.

"M, mor, mor, mor,"

In a small voice inaudible to anyone, it was like she was doing an imitation of a broken record. Ryūji could' ve sworn that he felt the temperature of Taiga's underarms suddenly go up as much as two degrees.

"So what's this? Are you guys playing around like always? You guys have such a good relationship, don't you?"

Patting both Taiga, who was now finally back on the ground, and Ryūji on the shoulder, Kitamura was looking at Taiga.

"Okay. Here, I forgot to give this back yesterday, and I accidentally took it home with me."

"... Ah... Yeah..."

"There were some splinters in a few places, so I took the liberty of filing it down some.... Is that okay?"

"... Yeah... Thanks..."

There was Taiga, who was completely red, pursing her lips into a small triangle, trembling, and there was the class representative, who was also her unrequited love. That scene as he returned her missing possession back to her was just like something out of a girls' comic.

"Now, don't go waving that around too much, since it' s dangerous."

"...Y...Yeah."

Changing hands from the dashing hero to the flushed heroine was a well-used wooden sword. Ryūji, who has actually been on the receiving end of its strikes, had mixed feelings as he watched the seemingly beautiful scene. Then,

"... Just now, what was that conversation about?"

"Hm?"

Without thinking, Ryūji turned around. Minori was standing with her head tilted, staring at him with her clear brown eyes.

"I'm asking, what did Taiga say just now? Takasu-kun ?"

"N... Nothing, really..."

Completely opposite of his cold response, he was of course just about to burst on the inside, like a detonator quickly counting down. Searching for help, he tried looking casually in Ami's direction, but she was already gone. "Ehh, where did you buy that, it's so cute~!" "At the second floor of the train station. It was really cheap

too!" "No way! I want one too!" "Me too!" Immediately after she had gone off on her own, she had formed another group with the peppy girls, Maya and Nanako. She just wasn't someone he could count on. No wait, maybe he was actually lucky in this case? She might not be as bad as Taiga, but even Ami's words were plenty explosive.

Minori was looking at Ryūji with upturned eyes,

"Well, if Takasu-kun says so, then I guess I'll take your word for it... It's just like I told you before. If you make Taiga unhappy, Minori will show no mercy... Just kidding."

"Uff..."

Swoosh. She gave a playful execution-style chop. Being told that by one's unrequited love, he wondered if there were any words painful enough to describe what he was feeling. Then, in a twist of fate, at the very same time,

"Hey, Aisaka. About the thing with Takasu and Ami yesterday, it seems like that was just Takasu helping her find her contact lens that had fallen out. So, you don't

need to worry about that, okay? And please don't get angry at Takasu either. I hope you two continue to get along! Bye!"

"Ah..."

Taiga was also being assaulted by a flurry of Kitamura 's own brand of misplaced concern.

They just wanted to bury their head in their arms... Ever since their first meeting in spring, it seemed like neither Taiga nor Ryūji had managed to change their relationships with their respective loves even one bit. Actually, if it was about something that had changed, there was at least one thing.

"... It's your fault... It's all your fault... Kitamura is cheering for a relationship between me and youuuu~~...!
"

"That should be my line! You were trying to sabotage me earlier, so you incurred the wrath of divine punishment!"

Stepping on each other's feet, elbowing one another, and glaring back and forth in an intense staring match, they lashed out with stinging barbs. The only thing

changing was that the relationship between Taiga and Ryūji was getting rougher.

* * *

This is probably Koigakubo Yuri's (29, single) lucky day.

"Good morning everyone!"

The swollen eyes that swept across the entire class with a smile, the double-eyelids that she is so proud of are swollen like cod roes. No one in class 2-C is dumb enough to ask the reason for that..... Yet there is a newbie teacher in charge of a first-year class (27, has a boyfriend, claims that "my boyfriend proposed to me, but i am still very hesitant, it is best to remain like this for now. The earliest that I will get married will be a year later.") in the teachers' office that asked: "Koigakubo-sensei, what happened to your eyes? I think maybe you should cover them up." What the hell are you talking about!? Just what do you know!

"Even though today is not a fine day, but I have something good to announce~~!"

It happened last night------

She went to a family restaurant alone for dinner (So what if I am alone? Is there something wrong with that?) and drank a bottle of beer she bought at a convenience store. Suddenly, she began thinking about her old friends .....

Speaking of which, these days I rarely hang out with my friends from back when I was a student. It is still not too late now, I guess it would be fine to call them? So she called to Risa whom she was very close with. Risa picked up the phone very soon: "No way! Yuri!? Its been a while ! Huh? Really? Sure, let's get together and have some fun! This saturday? Ah, sorry, I am not free that day. Actually , I am getting engaged on that day------ That's right, that's right, it is that officeholder. Oh my------ It can be considered unavoidable fate! If not for my parents' constant nagging..... Oh yeah, I heard that Saiya gave birth! Let's go see the baby together next time! Ever since Miyu's wedding, we stopped getting together..... By the way, how have you been recently? Didn't you say that there is a promising guy who is younger than you? You even said that you were going out with him during the Golden Week, so how did it go in the end? How far have

you two progressed~~? Huh? Hello? Hello------ Hello------?" How did it go in the end? What how! What am I supposed to say when there is nothing? Why is she so slow at catching on... Please!

She drank three cans of beer in one go. But feeling that it wasnt enough, she opened another bottle of red wine and even made some dishes that go with alchohol filled with salt and ultra high calories (Fried pork with pickled vegetables at two in the morning), and finally slept after a ridiculous and long cry.

The following morning, at eight thirty AM, meaning now:

"The swimming pool is open starting this week! Everyone is very excited right? Don't forget to take care of your body, and be prepared to take on all challenges!"

The pure and innocent senior high school students gave off "Yay------!" & "Yuck------!" duet------ The innocent guys laughed out happily; the girls on the other hand were complaining about "Stomach~~" "Thighs~~" "Arms ~~" "The swimsuit cannot be worn~~"

The currently single teacher sighed quietly: What a bunch of idiots..... You are still senior high students,

what's wrong with that.....You people are still young anyway, just what is wrong with that!

"Huh~~? We have to swim with guys in this school------? I don't want that, it is so embarassing------!"

Kawashima Ami! Aren't you super thin, super cute? And aren't you a model? What are you embarassed about ? Just, just what are you embarassed about.....

"Sensei! Let's end the morning session for the day!"

"Fine! Dismissed!"

Leaving everything else to the overly capable class representative Kitamura, the homeroom teacher stood on the dais looking blankly at the students below the platform. "Stand up! Bow!" Everyone bows in coordination with Kitamura's verbal commands.

At this moment, the homeroom teacher incidentally noticed------ That's right, why do I feel a little lucky today ?

The problematic child that scares the hell out of her, known as the palmtop tiger by the teaching staff, Aisaka Taiga is actually not grumbling impatiently, but

remained silent..... Even though she is as usual, not greeting her, but only staring emptily outside the window.

From those enviable rosy smooth cheeks she doesn't seem to be sick, maybe she just didn't notice the homeroom teacher at the dais and is too preoccupied looking at the skies!

It went peacefully this morning. To not have any loss of blood from the palmtop tiger's attacks------ Just this is enough to make the homeroom teacher feel lucky.

Maybe I am a little cute like this, and maybe with a little luck, maybe my marriage fortune will go up slightly ..... The currently single homeroom teacher showed a small winning signal, and gained the strength to face up to tomorrow.

Yet she failed to notice, her class is about to be dragged into a mysterious realm filled with love and hate very soon------ To not even notice something so minor, looks like it would be very difficult for her to work hardworkingly and wholeheartedly.

Chapter 2

"I'm not mad. Everything's fine!"

...Although Taiga said that, she had already gone ballistic long before saying that. Ryūji and Taiga's relationship continued to remain frosty for days.

Although they weren't particularly on good terms with each other, Taiga insisted on doing things as usual, which meant she had no intention of not stopping by the Takasu residence. She came over to have her meals, stayed late as always, and continued to maintain her insolent and snappy attitude. If Ryūji accidentally attempted to explain "that incident" or tried to ask why Taiga was so agitated by "that incident"...

She would say, "I am not..." followed by a barrage of words.

As a result, "that incident" became a taboo subject in the Takasu residence. However, now, "that incident" was becoming a taboo that got Taiga even more agitated, often saying, "Why should I care about that!? You make it sound like I'm mad!"

This stalemate lasted for quite a while. *Come to think of it, just what did I do?* Even Ryūji couldn't figure out the answer, so he simply allowed his nerves to hang ever more precariously by a thread as the days passed, until one day...

"Taiga~! Haven't we promised to do this already?"

"..."

It was after school, just after homeroom session had ended, when a Jizo Buddha appeared in the 2-C classroom.

"Didn't I already say I don't have any club activities today?"

"..."

The Jizo Buddha was none other than Aisaka Taiga, who sat firmly in her seat, her mouth forming an inverted V-shape. Her best friend, Kushieda Minori, was grabbing her by the shoulder and shaking her vigorously ,

"Taiga~!"

Ryūji, of course, noticed Minori's yells. Normally, he would go up and ask, "What's going on?" since this was a golden opportunity to go up and talk to her. But when he thought about his terrible relationship with Taiga these past few days, Ryūji became rather hesitant about approaching that Jizo Buddha.

Although he was mindful of Minori, Ryūji could only stand far away and feel helpless. The only thing he could do was naturally emit a dangerous glare from his eyes - not because he was scheming to assault the two girls, but because he was split by the unique feelings of self-awareness and love during puberty... Such is the heart of a man.

Help came from an unexpected corner.

"What's wrong, Minori-chan?"

As she was about to go home, Ami felt she should show her fraternity, choosing to wear her angelic smile as she walked towards Minori and the Jizo Buddha...

At that moment, Taiga went out of her Jizo Buddha mode and bared her fangs while growling softly, "Uuu.... !"

"Wah! Stop!"

Taiga waved her arms and legs around as her nose got clipped painfully by Minori. *I never knew something this simple could disarm Taiga... I see. As long as I do that, she'll have to submit... I must jot this down!* Ryūji quickly began to take out his notebook.

"Kawashima-san, sorry about this. For some reason, Taiga's just hard to deal with today. We promised to head to the stores near the station to buy our new swimsuits, but today she suddenly said she doesn't want to go..."

"Swimsuit? Ah, of course. The swimming pool will be opened tomorrow. I'm so looking forward to it!"

"Kawashima-san, have you bought your swimsuit already?"

"Well, I've got a swimsuit I wear when I workout, so I guess that would do~ Though that one is just a simple design made for competitions, it doesn't matter, right? It's gray all over, except for some orange stripes on the sides..."

"Oh, that won't do! The school only allows black or deep blue swimsuits without patterns on them, and stripes are limited only to white!"

"Eh? No way!"

Quietly seated, Taiga slowly lifted her head to look at Minori conversing with Ami.

Ryūji observed Taiga as she sneakily picked up her bag, crouched her already tiny figure and made an elegant tumble-turn past Minori's legs. She then lowered her center of gravity like a beast, preparing to leap outwards...

"Hey! She's escaping! Takasu-kun... grab her for me!"

"Huh!? Oh, umph!"

Ryūji stuck out his arm reflexively and grabbed onto Taiga, who just happened to pass by him... It was nothing but a chance miracle that he succeeded.

"Let me go, you perverted dog! How dare you defy your master? You traitor! P, p p, parasite!"

Ryūji ignored her stuttering insult and handed her straight back to Minori, who came rushing over.

"Thanks for helping!"

"Don't mention it."

The two of them happily exchanged gratitudes. Minori looked towards Taiga,

"Hey! T-a-i-g-a! Why did you run?"

"I, I never agreed to go! When you said you wanted to go buy a swimsuit, I simply said 'Sounds good', that's all! I... I wouldn't want to go!"

"Why!?"

"I... I don't wanna buy a swimsuit!"

"Then what are you going to do!? Your swimsuit from last year's already rotting, isn't it?"

Gulp... Taiga nodded embarrassingly. Ryūji murmured helplessly, "That's what happens when you don't wash and dry your swimsuit after wearing it..."

"That's why you have to buy a new one! How are you gonna attend PE if you don't have one?"

"I'll just skip PE then..."

"I don't believe this!"

This time it was Minori's turn to sigh helplessly. She patted Ryūji's back, who unknowingly had remained at the scene, and said "Your turn!" *Since when did I get dragged into this?* thought Ryūji, but he still spoke,

"What are you gonna do about your PE grades if you skip lessons?"

As a man, he had no choice but to take over for Minori.

"What business is it of yours anyway!?"

Whoa! Taiga's glare suddenly felt murderous, but right now he was standing right before Minori, so he couldn't just run away like that. *Although this is a bit under the belt, but here goes...*

"Hey, Kitamura! You say something as well!"

Kitamura had just packed his bag and was just about to leave when he was called by Ryūji. He turned and pushed his glasses up his nose,

"Hmm? What's up?"

"Taiga says she's gonna skip all swimming classes!"

"Now I can't pretend I didn't hear that!"

"...!"

Oh boy. Taiga's face has twisted out of shape! Serves her right. Kitamura approached without stopping and asked,

"Aisaka, are you not feeling well?"

"N... no..."

"Then you have to attend class. Though it looks like fooling around, a class is still a class."

Since Taiga is clumsy and isn't good at lying, when Kitamura decides to throw a direct ball towards her, there can only be one victor! "Good, I'm glad you understand! Well then, see you all tomorrow!" Kitamura waved his hand

nonchalantly and walked out of the classroom, leaving Taiga behind to stare at his back with what seemed like a bit of resentment in her eyes.

"Well, that's decided! Come on, Taiga! Oh, Kawashima-san, why don't you come along as well?"

"Eh? But..."

Ami turned to glance at Taiga and saw the Palmtop Tiger looking absolutely pissed with her cheeks puffed up, as if about to leap for the strike. Not only was she pissed, she emitted an aura that seemed to read "Don't you dare come, or else."

"Taiga! What's with that face? Kawashima-san just moved in recently, so she wouldn't know where to buy swimsuits."

"I'm fine, Minori-chan. I'm fine."

Minori gave Taiga a scolding, while Ami simply shook her head and smiled elegantly. She then took one step backwards and said,

"I'll be going with Takasu-kun instead. You're fine with it, right, Takasu-kun? Can I come? Can I?"

"WHA!?"

Ami's long and slender arm gently leaned on Ryūji's arm, as though they were about to cling to each other.

"I can't...?"

"Huh? Eh? Me and you!?"

Ryūji gulped and looked at Ami. He knew that the clear white cute face that was looking up at him was just a crude mask, but he couldn't help being mesmerized by it... It was charming, crystalline, breathtaking. Ryūji was being continuously assaulted by Ami's watery eyes, shuddering lips, and her lonely-looking chihuahua face. As though being led by a rope, he nodded.

"Really!? That's great! I'm so glad, Takasu-kun sure is reliable! Oh, you wouldn't mind, would you, Aisaka-san? "

Ami's provocative eyes lit up with a blue flare as she glanced towards Taiga. "Huh? Eh? What's with this atmosphere?" Minori asked puzzled as she turned and looked at Taiga and Ami, while Ryūji could only stand stiffly.

"I'm fine with it."

Taiga waved her hair irritatingly and smirked. Her rose-colored lips opened and fired her venom,

"Ryūji already agreed to it. What's that got to do with me? Ryūji can do whatever he wants with anyone, why should I---"

..."Care?" Is that what she's trying to say?

"WHAM!" A sudden thud. Taiga had wanted to bend down as she attempted to finish her sentence, but she bent too much and smacked her forehead straight on the table. The invincible Palmtop Tiger now held her forehead while kneeling on the classroom floor.

"T, Taiga!"

"Oh dear! It looks painful to me..."

Ryūji and Minori hurried forward to attend to Taiga. Standing right behind them,

"Could it be... that Aisaka-san is very clumsy?"

As Taiga's venom dispersed by this unexpected accident, Ami tilted her head in realization, as though she was understanding another secret of the world.

* * *

"Why!? Why does it have to come to this? Why don't you get lost somewhere else with Ryūji? Somewhere like Europe, or the Arctic Circle, or even the demon capital Shinjuku!"

"Oh well~ It's not like I did it on purpose~ Because he said this is the only place where they sell swimsuits. Oh my! I'm sure this one would suit Aisaka-san well. You see, it says 'Child-size. Suitable for Ages 6-9'. Isn't that cute~? It's a two-piece as well."

"Maybe you should wear this one, Kawashima-san. It suits a chihuahua with raging hormones. See? It's 5cm wider..."

"Isn't that a pair of swimming briefs for guys?"

"Oh, you're right. I see, if the bird-shaped Kawashima Ami were to wear this, her thick body hair would show, right?"

"Why are you saying things like that so loudly!?"

Their venomous duel echoed in the corner of the building.

"This is really getting embarrassing..."

Being dragged into the ladies swimsuit corner, Ryūji the highschool student was already blushing, not to mention having to listen to such a conversation.

"Really... You guys... I'm sorry I got you involved in this, Takasu-kun."

"It's alright, I don't really... mind."

Standing next to a bland decorative department store plant, Minori looked especially mesmerizing. If it wasn't for Minori, the whole thing would have left Ryūji falling into despair... though not anymore thanks to her.

It was just after four in the afternoon, inside one of the four-story shopping attractions of the town - the station shopping center. There were hardly any people even at this hour; it was especially deserted at the swimsuit corner, with only some Hawaiian music playing in the background.

In this empty corner, Minori was carefully examining some plain-looking swimsuits while conversing with Ryūji,

"Does Takasu-kun have a swimsuit? The men's section is just beyond that pillar over there."

"I'm fine. My swimsuit from last year is still intact..."

"I guess. You're not Taiga, so you wouldn't have allowed it to rot."

"Taiga's just especially filthy."

"Yup." Minori smiled, while taking down a swimsuit from the hanger racket,

"By the way, mine hasn't rotted yet. I'm just thinking of buying a new swimsuit for myself. Hmm... Is this OK?"

If Ryūji could quickly reply, "Yup, it's good, suits you just fine." Then they'd be off to a flying start... Despite knowing that, Ryūji just felt something strange with his throat, and was unable to say anything charming.

I'm such a hopeless idiot! Ryūji silently began to hate himself... Choosing a swimsuit together with Minori was such a good chance... *This was something I never even dreamed of!* Ryūji's imagination was easily overwhelmed by reality.

Of course, Minori did not discover Ryūji's frustration.

"Hmm... does the bottom look thin?"

30 degress... She made a V-shape with her hand and measured them against her waist. She then promptly placed the swimsuit back on the rack and slowly walked towards swimsuits from other brands. Minori casually said,

"Ah yes, I've been thinking. Takasu-kun's uniform and sports wear always look so tidy. You always have them ironed, right?"

"Eh...?"

C, could she be... complimenting me? As it came all too sudden, Ryūji's mind went absolutely blank, but he still tried his best to stay calm while looking at Minori's cheek .

"R, really? Well... that's because my mum's usually out working, so I have to handle these myself. Besides, I don't really hate doing these..."

"Wow~! That's amazing! So you actually do all your own chores?"

Feeling his face turning hot instantly, Ryūji turned his head away, pretending to casually look at the swimsuits, he even unknowingly grabbed at the breasts of the display dummy nearby. However, Minori came out with something else more sensational,

"Taiga told me 'Ryūji really knows how to do his chores!', and 'He sure knows a lot of stuff I wouldn't know, isn't that amazing?' To hear Taiga complimenting

a guy... To be precise, this is the first time I've ever heard her complimenting anyone! So I was really shocked."

"..."

"Ah, Takasu-kun, you can't do that! That's a dummy, squeeze any harder and you'll squish them!"

"T, Taiga... complimenting... **me**?"

Ryūji could feel his eyes popping out.

How can something this ridiculous happen? It's impossible! Taiga's always calling me a perverted dog! How can someone who treats me like a dog all the time compliment me?

Aha! ... I get it! A flash appeared in Ryūji's eyes as he thought of an answer that he would accept: *Minori is lying. Even if it's not a complete lie, it's still a very ridiculous one... And that's because she's always hoping to hook me up with Taiga.*

"You're kidding me."

"Don't you believe me? Hmm, well, it's your choice whether you believe me or not ~"

Minori shrugged and smiled while whispering to Ryūji, "What a pity~" *No matter what you say, it just won't happen. Even if it is my crush telling me that.*

Right, Taiga? How could it be possible? There's no reason to believe, right? Especially when we're not getting along well lately, I just don't see her complimenting me at all! While he was thinking, someone called out from behind,

"What do you guys think of this swimsuit?"

Both Ryūji and Minori turned their heads...

"Whoa!"

"Wah!"

"Heh heh," Reflected in their eyes was a blushing smile .

The dazzling sight before their eyes had caused them to momentarily forget that they were inside the station shopping center.

There was no extra body hair on the clean milk-white skin, which was so smooth it was unreal.

"Isn't it nice? I wonder if it'll look weird? You think I look out of place in such a plain-looking swimsuit? It feels embarrassing having to wear this in front of the guys!"

Every time they blinked their eyes, their vision was occupied by the dazzle of starry fragments...

"What the hell is up with those long legs!? This is too eye-catching!"

... Minori had gone nuts.

Ryūji agreed with Minori as well. *No matter how you look at it, it just defies logic.* Ami kept her round eyes opened while shaking her long hair, as though genuinely feeling puzzled,

"Eh~? But I picked a plain-looking one! How is this eye-catching? I don't get it, it's strange. I wonder why?"

It was only a few weeks ago that she was discovered hiding flab in her gut. Right now, her stomach had slimmed down considerably. This was probably due to the fact she no longer had to force feed herself under pressure; the curves on her body were now stunningly beautiful.

Her body was wrapped in a mature-looking swimsuit, while her long snow-white legs and thin, tender arms extended from it.

A tall and slim figure, a small cute face, plus a pair of dazzling eyes - the sight of such a dream-like fairy was nearly enough to cause one's heart to stop beating.

So this is a professional model...? "That's strange, I really don't get it!" Ami once again stood before the mirror and examined the swimsuit she wore. Ryūji and Minori were completely dumbfounded. *Isn't this too... perfect? Her legs are too long! Too slender! Too white! Too beautiful! .....* As though waking from a dream, Minori stepped forward towards Ami,

"K, Kawashima-san! Which brand is that swimsuit? Not that I want to buy the same one as yours, but I'd like to make myself look thin as well! So I'll be getting this brand!"

"There's plenty of those in the fitting room~. Oh, how about we wear a lover's set, Minori-chan?"

"No thanks, hope you understand."

No way am I gonna let you outshine me! Minori turned towards the section where Ami pointed and rushed off.

"Heh heh..."

Ami's eyes, which were staring at the mirror just a while ago, suddenly changed... Ryūji thought, *Here she goes.* while standing calmly and observing this incredible transformation.

Ami quickly decided on the most beautiful pose - placing one arm on her hip and the other on her mouth, and then slowly leaning forward to emphasize her bosom,

"This is bad, this is really bad... Ami-chan is just so, so, soooo cute! But, this is sure scary! Is it okay for Ami-chan to be this cute? Ami-chan looks cuter this year than last year, as well as cuter today than yesterday! Wonder how cute and beautiful Ami-chan can get? Even this swimsuit. .. This plain and normal looking swimsuit, it doesn't even cost more than 10,000 yen! Ah... if only this were a cute bikini, how much cuter would Ami-chan get?"

She appeared to be pretty satisfied.

"Oh boy, even Ami-chan's feeling scared at such a thought... Wonder if Ami-chan would be better off as a gravure idol? Don't you think it's criminal to hide such a perfect figure? Thought so

. Hey, Takasu-kun, don't you think so as well?"

"Don't you feel embarrassed wearing that while walking around? We're in a shop, you know?"

"Huh~? Are you kidding, Takasu-kun? Ami-chan is soooo~ cute, what's there to be embarrassed about? If anyone sees Ami-chan then it's their lucky day! Ami-chan's already thinking of charging 3000 yen per person~ Oh, how about 3000 yen for one look every second?"

Slowly lifting her long hair upwards, Ami had already taken off her angelic mask, revealing a mischievous glance within those cold and clear eyes of hers while sporting a teasing smile. This was the sort of vanity reserved for girls who know they're pretty; her lips made a sneer as though taunting someone, proof that she was definitely up to no good.

"Needless to say, Ami-chan's gone through hair-removal surgery!"

She purposefully revealed her hairless armpits, emphasizing her figure. *Is this supposed to be extra service?*

"You know..."

"Ahhhh~ Ami-chan is so cute today as well~

"

She said while throwing a glance towards the mirror. *Ami's in a really good mood today, looks like she's really satisfied with her perfect swimsuit look.*

However, at this moment, there was a more pressing matter for Ryūji...

"Um... h, how's this one? ... I can fit in alright, but..."

Minori stuck her head out from within the fitting room curtain,

"Huh? Which one? Lemme see~!"

The sandals Ami wore clicked as she walked towards Minori. *Eh? Which one?* Ryūji also wanted to "click" his way towards Minori to find out. *But I can't... Right...?*

Ryūji pretended to look around at the towels and goggles while slowly approaching, raising his ears to listen to their conversation.

"Minori-chan, come out already~! You won't know whether it fits if you don't look at yourself in the mirror, right?"

"Eeeeeh!? H, h, h, h, how can I? N, n, n, no, I can't!"

"You're gonna have to wear this in front of everyone tomorrow anyway!"

"That's completely different! Kyaa!!!"

"Well well, isn't this very cute? It really suits you! You don't have any excess flab, and the skin around your shoulders looks absolutely beautiful, it feels great!"

"R, r, r... really? Do I? Do I?"

"Of course! Since we're at it, let's show Takasu-kun as well. A guy's opinion is very important too. Hey, Takasu-kun~!"

"Kyaa! No! You can't, you can't, you can't! Don't come over, Takasu-kun! And don't look!"

Gulp... Ryūji remained anchored on the floor for about ten seconds. *If she says don't look, then I won't.* From the

outside, it was impossible to tell that Ryūji was waging an epic battle with the Demons of Lust, his eyes merely emitting a dangerous glow. His rationality eventually persuaded him to cancel the idea of pretending not to hear anything and walking over. He bit his tightly closed lips so hard that it bled - A sign of a gentleman.

It was only after sensing that Minori had returned into the fitting room that Ryūji found it safe to turn around...

"That's strange,"

"W, what is...?"

Still wearing a swimsuit, Ami stared at Ryūji and did not bother hiding the mischievous thoughts within her eyes, as if they had X-ray capabilities.

"It seems Takasu-kun can't bear the look of Minori-chan in a swimsuit... hmm..."

"Wha!? Of course not! She told me not to look, so I..."

"Why are you so nervous? Forget it! I'm gonna go get this swimsuit off."

She's probably not interested in hearing my excuse, huh? Ami removed her high-heeled sandals and walked across the swimsuit corner barefooted.

Just what on earth was she up to? Right now, only Ryūji remained... *Somehow this feels...*

Ryūji began to notice the stares of the other customers and shop assistants directed at him. It was actually quite dangerous for a male high school student to be all alone in a female swimsuit corner. Desperate for help, Ryūji began to look around...

"Come to think of it, where's Taiga?"

It was only then that he noticed that the girl he was so used to seeing every day had disappeared. *The four fitting rooms are located in separate corners of the building, one of them is empty, while the other two are being occupied by Minori and Ami, this means...* Walking towards the remaining one, he found a pair of recognizable miniature-sized shoes under the curtain.

What's going on, Taiga? So you were here all along? Just as Ryūji was about to say that, the curtains opened for a few centimetres and a head emerged - it was indeed Taiga.

Her eyes rolled around, as though looking for something, while her mouth appeared as a straight line, and her brows were wrinkled due to some sort of anxiety. From that expression, she seemed to be at wits' end and was seeking help.

Just when Ryūji was thinking about whether to call her first...

"Ryūji..."

Taiga had noticed him. Although she was first to speak , her face contorted in resentment, though she still stuck out her snow-white finger and called out to Ryūji.

Reminded of the cold war he had with her, Ryūji had a bad feeling about this, but he still replied,

"What?"

Even though knowing nothing good will come out of it, I still decided to respond to a summon... Is this the sad fate of being a dog?

"Never mind that! Just come over... Closer! More! Over here!"

Taiga frowned anxiously. Being mindful of her surroundings, her lowered voice was filled with urgency as she frantically waved her hand at Ryūji, who obediently walked, step by step, towards the fitting room , while growing more and more suspicious...

"... Could it be... that you aren't wearing anything... WHOA!?"

Ryūji was suddenly assaulted without warning.

"Umph!" He was dragged into the fitting room by the arm that suddenly emerged. The curtain quickly closed, just like how a Venus fly trap would snap shut upon capturing its prey, and darkness loomed. Ryūji was too terrified to make any noise. Losing his balance, he crashed on the mirror and fell on the floor.

"Ow... What the hell was that for!?"

"Shut up! You want to be treated as a pervert!?"

Ryūji suddenly realized he was now sharing a narrow space of about nine square feet with Taiga, who was sitting on the floor with her uniform tidily on (instead of not wearing anything),

"I... don't know what I should do anymore!"

"W, w, wait...!?"

"Wah!" Taiga grabbed Ryūji by the shoulder, her eyes had suddenly gone red. *Oh shit! Is she gonna cry?*

"What now? What's wrong?"

Squatting on the narrow floor space, Ryūji lowered his voice, while trying his best to look at Taiga in the face and comforting her,

"Don't cry! Or Kushieda and Kawashima are going to get the wrong ideas!"

"... B, b, but I... don't know which one to pick anymore!
"

When he looked carefully, he found that they were surrounded by many black and deep blue swimsuits. Each of them had been turned over, it seemed she had already tried them all.

"You just couldn't decide which swimsuit to wear, right? What's there to cry about? Man, I can't believe you just toss these stuff around..."

"They all have problems!"

Taiga shook her head vigorously, she was about to lose it. *If this goes any further, she might become physical.*

"I, I get it... Anyway, just calm down and don't cry! What are you not happy with? The style? Color? Or do you want me to choose one for you?"

Ryūji had subconsciously switched into delicate mode, though Taiga shook her head even more,

"It's none of those! It's... the size! The size's not right!"

Now I see... Ryūji finally understood. For someone with an elementary schoolkid figure, wearing an adult swimsuit was just asking too much.

"In that case... how about wearing a child-sized one?"

"Absolutely not! Stop saying the same things as Kawashima Ami!"

Taiga lifted her tearful face and growled with her lowered voice.

"Speaking of which, wouldn't it be better if you ask Kushieda or Kawashima about this instead?"

"Don't you think I would have done that if I could!? But they both found sizes that fit them, it's just too embarrassing if I'm the only one who couldn't! How do you expect me to say it!? Besides, that split-personality freak shouldn't even be considered!"

"Though you say that, I wouldn't know what to do... Oh, how about this one?"

As Ryūji carefully placed each swimsuit back onto its hanger, he found a swimsuit much smaller than all the others.

"Ooohhh... this is XS. This should be small enough? You want to try it on? Or is that not good as well?"

"I've already tried that, it's... ordinary, sort of! The problem is with... how should I say... a certain body part... "

Her voice grew softer and softer, to the point where the last part of her sentence was nearly inaudible.

"Then this one should do, right? If the size isn't too far off, then I'll modify it for you. Oh, this one's XS as well... Guess this won't do, that one's bigger."

Ryūji selected three especially small swimsuits from the dozen or so swimsuits. For Taiga, these three were all "ordinary".

"In that case, we'll pick one from these three! ... Aha! How's this? The price is just right, and the material's pretty firm... Hmm, this can be placed in a dry cleaner, right...?"

After carefully confirming the laundry label, Ryūji handed a swimsuit to Taiga, "I think this one is great!" Surprisingly, Taiga accepted it obediently.

Her eyes moved between Ryūji and the swimsuit on her hands,

"Umm... yeah... this... sure is the best..."

Sigh...

The ambient mood was disturbed by a sigh, giving the narrow fitting room a funeral-like atmosphere.

... Let's go have a seat at Sudoba (Sudou Coffee Bar)! But Minori and Ami's invitation was turned down by Taiga. As a result, Ryūji did not feel comfortable with going alone with the two girls, so he had no choice but to go home with Taiga. Along the way, Taiga showed no signs of being agitated or being mad, which had not happened for some time. She merely said softly, "You could have gone with them..."

* * *

Thank goodness, she didn't get agitated or mad at all. For some reason, Taiga's mood seemed to have taken a turn for the better.

It wasn't until six in the evening that Ryūji realized how mistaken he was...

"Hey! Dinner's ready..."

"..."

"The miso soup's great as well! Plus we have pudding afterward!"

"..."

Not only did she not help out in preparing dinner, but all the lacy furball-like object known as "Taiga" did was lie on top of the small table and toy with a piece of lettuce that hung on the bird cage with a paperclip. Lacking any focus in her eyes, she would occasionally sigh deeply as well.

She was not even bothered by the messy state of her long hair, to put it simply, Taiga was now in "melancholy " mode.

Standing concerned from a distance, Ryūji took out his family heirloom: a piece of cucumber marinated in rice bran, and rinsed it while thinking, *Poor Inko-chan's gonna suffer from more mounting pressure as things go.*

"... Woo... shuu...?"

Inko-chan gently pushed the lettuce that Taiga was toying with towards her. *That voice... was he trying to say ' Would you'?*

"... No..."

Taiga gently shook her head.

... Taiga was conversing with Inko-chan. Even a bird was feeling concerned for Taiga, but right now Taiga was as powerless as a sinking corpse in the deep sea. Even her absent-minded gaze lost its usual glitter. *Looking this melancholic, seems like she's not only angry with herself, but has basically given up completely.* The sudden depression had left Ryūji feeling puzzled... though he did have some ideas. Ryūji knew it probably had something to do with the swimsuits, but he did not know why it would cause her such gloom. *Haven't we already bought the swimsuit?*

"T, Taiga... I'm gonna try making some Nanban Chicken for tonight. Although it's my first time, it should come out fine..."

"..."

"I'm gonna add mayonnaise as well!"

"..."

That still failed to rouse her appetite. *At least she looked fine when in her 'cold-war' mode last night, there's nothing worse than this depressing atmosphere.*

"Oh no~! I'm late, I'm late~! I can't believe I've forgotten that a girl's coming for an interview today~! I've gotta leave in 15 minutes!"

Ryūji's mother, Yasuko, rushed over noisily.

"Huh!? Just what're you doing? Hurry up and eat... Whoa! Today's costume looks exciting!"

"R-e-a-l-l-y~?"

Hearing her son say that, Yasuko smiled happily, "Hee hee~" She then raised her arms and stretched them towards the ceiling. *Is she trying to mimic a letter Y in 'Yasuko'?* She even raised a leg. *Maybe she's making a Glico logo?* Ryūji wasn't too sure about that one either.

With a body that hardly looked older than thirty, Yasuko wore a white mini-skirt so short that her buttocks were almost revealed, while her F-sized bosom was dangling non-stop in front of her slim chest.

... Women sure have it tough, having those two soft structures hanging off the front of them... Just when Ryūji was thinking of that...

"Kyaa! Taiga-chan, how perverted you are! Actually groping people..."

Taiga, who was supposed to be lying on the floor, suddenly straightened herself as though she had thought of something, stood up and began grabbing at Yasuko's wobbling breasts.

"TAIGA! Stop sexually harassing other people's mothers!"

"Ah~ it's fine, it's fine, Ryū-chan! Since Taiga no longer looks scary today, Ya-chan's happy! Hee hee!"

Grope, grope, grope, grope... Although Taiga continued to fondle Yasuko's elastic bosom, her eyes were as blurry as a dead fish's.

"This is freaking me out already, so stop it! Seriously... hurry up and eat, and stop playing with breasts!"

Ryūji squeezed himself between the two of them while gracefully placing the dishes on the small table. "Dinner time!" Yasuko obediently picked up her chopsticks; Taiga quietly sat herself down.

"Let's eat~! Wow! It looks delicious! Ya-chan loves Ryū-chan the most!"

Yasuko's breast continued to wobble as she smiled like a child beneath her perfect makeup...

"Wah~"

"HEY!"

Taiga was now poking Yasuko's breast with her chopsticks.

As Yasuko left in a hurry, carrying her sole and most expensive Chanel bag, the Takasu residence fell into an awkward silence.

As usual, Taiga finished her dinner and laid lazily on the tatami mat, while paying attention to the lines

between the ceiling tiles... or rather, she was simply staring at what was before her eyes.

Ryūji washed the dishes and wiped his hands while secretly observing Taiga, who was behaving strangely. *Just what is wrong with her? Is she alright? Although I'm concerned, she's no longer as aggressive as she was yesterday, and she hasn't caused any harm either, so I guess I can just leave her alone...*

"Umm... Taiga, have you prepared everything you need to for tomorrow's swimming lesson? You got your towel in the bag? Oh yeah, let me help you modify the swimsuit we bought earlier today."

Ryūji still decided to talk about it. Seeing her lackluster pale face, Ryūji could not bring himself to remain silent. It felt as complicated as seeing the stray cat that constantly came to steal the kitchen food getting sick... He wasn't being nosy, nor was he being sympathetic.

"How about it?"

Yet Taiga pretended not to hear and turned her tiny back towards Ryūji.

"Let me modify it for you, alright? Didn't you say it doesn't fit? But if you're fine with it, then I won't."

Taiga continued to face her back towards Ryūji, and simply replied softly,

"You talk too much."

A cold reply that was unwilling to say anything further. Although deeply injured, a tiger was still a tiger, and was able to pierce the most fragile spot in the heart with a needle. Even a target like Ryūji would get hurt.

I've already tried my best, even if I'm not good at it. I even agreed to help her modify her swimsuit size... I did all this just to cheer Taiga up, who was looking depressed, since I am a bit worried about her... Having done all that, what kind of reply is 'You talk too much'!?

"You..."

This includes all the unforgotten grudges we've been having ... All because of Ami's prank, Taiga ends up seeing us embracing each other, why should I put up with her stinging remarks!? Not to mention, she herself doesn't admit she's criticizing me, neither does she admit she was angry, instead

questioning why she should get angry at my actions. Although she says that, for days she's given me nothing but a sour face, and now this...

"You're really annoying..."

Enough. Ryūji's eyes squinted cruelly like a cobra, but he wasn't cursing the world to end, it was because his patience was snapping,

"Oh, is that it? Then I won't be bothering anymore! Nor will I take care of you anymore! You can go ahead and wear that wrong-sized swimsuit tomorrow!"

"I'm going to take the day off tomorrow, so it wouldn't matter..."

"If you want to take a day off or whatever then that's your call! I wouldn't give a damn if you have to repeat a year! This pisses me off! You're too selfish, you know that ? Why must I endure this treatment just because I end up embracing Kawashima!? Anyone can tell you're bearing a grudge!"

Taiga stood up. The mechanical doll that was once thought to be broken had suddenly stood up, and the mood instantly became terrifying. Ryūji quickly swallowed what he had wanted to say.

"... Why must you mention that again?"

The eyes that turned over were red with rage, while the twisted lips were tightly shut - until those jaws would open to reveal their white fangs ready to bite - this abandoned doll appearance looked absolutely terrifying. *Oh crap. I've stepped on a landmine.*

"No... um..."

Ryūji got up and began to back away, trying to keep a safe distance. *Stomp!* Taiga marched barefooted on the tatami, approaching Ryūji step by step. Those moist and glittering big eyes were full of murderous intent, craving for blood.

"You know... Ryūji..."

Ryūji could feel his neck being licked by the icy, repressed voice,

"I've already said it many, many, MANY, TIMES... I don't give a damn about it... I'm not mad at all... If I do look like it, that's simply because of you trying to second guess my thoughts as though you know everything... You don't get it? Huh!? Are you sure you really don't get it!? Huh!? Huh!? Huh!? Huh!? Huh!?"

"Ugh..."

Taiga approached slowly like a panzer tank, elbowing her arm on Ryūji's chest, and even stepped on Ryūji's feet with her bare toes. Now, Ryūji could no longer escape.

"Come on! Answer me!"

"What I mean is..."

"Enough! Shut up! Listen carefully to what I'm about to say! To hell with all those incidents from before! That has got absolutely nothing to do with this! You get it!?"

"What I wanted to ask is... just what do you mean by ' this'!?"

"I'm going home."

After yelling what she wanted to say, Taiga quickly turned her head and went for the entrance.

"Hold it right there! You think you can just say whatever you want and then leave just like that!?"

"Of course! You're annoying, you know?"

Ryūji stepped in front of Taiga to confront her, resigned to his fate, he frantically waved his arms in attempting to stop Taiga from escaping. *I've stepped on the mine anyway, so it doesn't matter if I make a ruckus before it explodes.*

"Going to someone's place to eat, but acting all depressed, you think you can just say you're going home and act as though everything's fine!? Just what's going on here?"

"If you want to moan, do it to the landlady downstairs, you stupid dog!"

"That's fine by me! But I want to know why you're so depressed?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Why do you hate the swimming pool so much?"

"You listen carefully! It's because I can't swim, that's why I hate it!"

"That's not the real reason! There's no way you can say it so neatly!"

"Tch!" As she clicked her tongue, Taiga stepped forward, lowering her tiny body and barged through Ryūji like a talented dancer... or at least she attempted to...

"Wah!?"

"Now's my chance!"

Taiga never fails to disappoint in moments like these.

"Ow... Why on earth are there soybeans on the floor!?"

Taiga had stepped on the soybeans that were on the tatami and fell with all fours facing the ceiling. Grabbing the opportunity, Ryūji quickly brought down his foot - not on Taiga, not on the soybeans, but on her skirt.

"What do you think you're doing!? You stupid dog! Get off me! You'll leave a paw print! Get your dirty dog paw off my lace skirt!"

"That's for calling me annoying!"

Taiga tried frantically to get up, but since Ryūji had stepped on the area near her waist, she was basically stuck. Every time she tried to struggle, her skirt would slowly slide down, revealing her white hip and waist, as well as a little bit of her panties.

"Damn it! Stop fooling around! I can't believe you'd ambush me with soybeans!"

"Stop trying to tarnish people's reputations with random accusations! Those soybeans were leftover from the soymilk that Yasuko was grinding this morning."

"Ya-chan!? She drinks soy milk!?"

"Since when have you been calling her so intimately!? HEY! You idiot!"

What was she thinking!? Taiga suddenly tossed the beans in the air, and caught them with her mouth... and

ate them. *She's chewing on beans that were crushed with her bare foot!* She munched three times before swallowing them.

"That's disgusting! Give me more!"

"Aren't you contradicting yourself!? What on earth were you thinking? Eating the beans like that? You'll get a stomachache!"

"I want to replenish my soy proteins!"

"Wha..."

A thought suddenly appeared in Ryūji's head as he looked down at Taiga, who was struggling to get her stepped on skirt out.

When Yasuko said, "I'm gonna be drinking soy milk everyday from now on~"...

"Ya-chan saw this on TV. It says soy protein helps your breasts grow big~! Ya-chan will be in big trouble if her breasts were to shrink. So precautions have to be made! Ya-chan's so smart~!"

Taiga, unable to decide which swimsuit to pick, was close to tears in the fitting room...

"It's... the size! The size's not right!"

Soy proteins... Soybeans... Picking them up and eating them right away... Hates swimming pools... Gets depressed over swimsuits...

"T, Taiga... Could it be..."

"N, no... NO! Don't... don't say it..."

Fear began to show in Taiga's eyes, as she grabbed onto his woolly sweater and looked at Ryūji with eyes seeking salvation. She then retreated towards the wall, while shaking her head and repeating, "Please don't..."

But, I have to.

I have to say what I think. If I don't confirm it, I'll never be able to live normally with Taiga again, so...

"Are you... flat-chested...?"

"Ugh..."

The subsequent tiger cub howling was the main reason why the landlady raised the rent on the Takasus, causing constant headaches for Ryūji... Of course, no one else knew about that.

* * *

Compared to her depressed self from a while ago, Taiga now looked very cheery, as though a burden had been removed from her shoulders.

After the previous event, the both of them left the Takasu residence and walked for about a minute before coming to the ultra-posh condo apartment building.

This apartment is still as exquisite as usual, though it's still a bit too big for Taiga to live alone in. Ryūji sat on the sofa

edge while waiting for Taiga to emerge from her room, where she had hidden herself, doing God-knows-what. She left a warning before she closed the door,

"You wait here. If you even dare open this door, I'll kill you!"

The sparkling chandelier glittered dimly in hues of white and yellow. The living room was unusually quiet, unlike the soundproof-like situation from before at the Takasu residence. *Yet this silence feels like the calm before a storm...*

"I mean... what's the big deal with bust sizes?"

Ryūji mumbled to himself while taking his specialized mop and beginning to clean the glass table.

Ever since they met in spring, though it had not been long, they lived a life where they often saw each other. Ryūji thought to himself, *Taiga's always fretting over some trivial matter.*

It wasn't long ago when Taiga was feeling frustrated with her name and her tiny figure. When they first met, she nearly went ballistic over constantly failing to properly approach her crush, Kitamura. And now she

was getting depressed over the size of her chest... *Taiga's already over-sensitive to begin with, not to mention she gets easily agitated.*

She's got such a beautiful face, has a great friend in Minori, and lives in a grand apartment, what more does she want? No, I guess this apartment's probably a source of her depression as well. Ryūji sighed. He knew that for Taiga, this apartment was evidence of her being forsaken by her parents.

Could her conflict with her parents be the source of her extremely unstable personality? Ryūji wasn't going to draw conclusions and say that this was some "mental trauma", though it was hard not to.

Gets angry and depressed easily, extremely moody, prone to tears, and then asks for help the moment after she's done scolding someone - this Palmtop Tiger's hopeless. Nevertheless, Ryūji just could not leave Taiga like that, nor could he stay away from her. *This is a world where those people who believe Taiga to be some carnivore that ought to stay in the wild will never understand.*

I've got to change my attitude. Ryūji had made up his mind by the time the table corner was wiped sparkling clean, *This time I must stay by this unstable and melancholic tiger's side.*

I'm a dragon, and you're a tiger... the dragon is the only beast that can stand equal to the tiger... He had even made such an exaggerated declaration. Ryūji couldn't find it in himself to leave Taiga alone, so he would have to seriously support her on a psychological level as well.

That's it! The problem isn't with the size of your chest. It's the size of your heart!

"Ryūji..."

"Whoa!?"

"How is it...?"

"Ah... umm..."

No... t, t, this is... so it is... but...

Startled, Ryūji fell from the sofa, and ended up seeing something even more shocking.

Taiga emerged from her bedroom door. In order to show Ryūji how depressed she was, she had put on the dark-blue swimsuit that she had just bought today without even removing the tag.

The long hair around her waist wrapped around her overly tiny body.

The indirect lighting caused her pale skin to glisten like a white pearl.

Probably due to her height, everyone simply concluded that her body size must be the same as a child's. Nobody could have guessed she actually had a slender waist.

"What are you nodding about?"

Although she looked gloomy, her beautiful face, which was as delicate as a glass-made artifact, now looked even more splendid. The sight of Taiga in a swimsuit had the ability to give one an urge to dress her up like a doll.

Having said that...

"They do look... kinda flat..."

Taiga's chest was pressed just under the thick swimsuit. There seemed to be some bulge just under the white skin near her collar bone. *She isn't completely flat chested... It's more like they're flattened under pressure. The*

true cause of Taiga's "flat-chestedness" isn't her chest size, but her breasts being too soft.

From her armpits to her back, there was no bulge to be seen at the necessary places. If she wasn't careful, there was a danger of her swimsuit falling completely off her shoulders when she moved her body, which was quite sad. To put it simply, "a certain body part" was the reason why the swimsuit wouldn't fit.

"Where are the chest pads?"

"I've already put them in, but... haha, t, they fell back inwards... haha..."

Taiga sighed while wearing her unique "expressionless smile", as she sat on a leather sofa personally designed by some famous Scandinavian designer. Ryūji suddenly noticed something strange...

"Ah, uh..."

Ryūji had wanted to investigate why Taiga looked so flat-chested, but he discovered he could not look straight at her.

Her exposed white skin was as delicate as a glass container, and her waist was so slender that it might break if held onto. She was thin but hardly bony. The sight of her feminine figure caused Ryūji to develop an unusual feeling that even he was afraid of.

Looking at her like that is just sacrilegious... I can't do something like that, it's just pathetic. Ryūji decided to cocoon himself from the thought of staring at her.

"It's flat, isn't it? I've got nothing there... that's why I hate the swimming pool..."

Taiga's low voice simply went in Ryūji's left ear and out the right.

In that case, when Ami was wearing a swimsuit in the station shopping complex, she did indeed look pretty. She had a great body, and her figure was well-tuned, causing people to panic and fantasize, but there was no feeling of fear like now. Could it have something to do with her being a popular model? Where being observed was part of her profession, even though she wasn't working? Or could it be because she was too beautiful to the point of being surreal? B-but, the problem is...

"Ryūji? Are you even listening?"

Standing before him with her eyes glued on him, Taiga's existence was as real as one could get. By simply grabbing her with ease, one could even sense her body temperature was at 36 degrees Celcius...

"A... anyway, why don't you go wear something first? Or you'll catch a cold."

Taiga nodded at Ryūji's behest, and returned to her room to get a bathrobe. Upon seeing the bedroom door closing...

"Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah..."

Ryūji frantically rubbed his face. *What on earth's going on!? Why am I feeling so bizarre!? Not to mention I feel extremely guilty to the point of shivering... I didn't even do anything! Why is it!?*

"Up till last year, I was never this frustrated," Taiga said after putting on her bathrobe,

"... Or to be more precise, I never even realized I was flat-chested before, since we never had swimming lessons in junior high,"

Ryūji finally returned from his state of shock, and paid close attention to Taiga's speech. Although this was Taiga's apartment, the one preparing all the tea and snacks was Ryūji.

"Last year, I attended swimming lessons as everyone else had, but right after the last swimming class, I discovered something... Photos of me in my swimsuit that were secretly taken by the guys from other classes were circulating everywhere."

"I see. I can't believe they'd do such a thing..."

"Of course, I went straight to the Photography Club's club room and raised hell there."

"So you were the one who single-handedly caused the instant dissolution of the Photography Club?"

"Here are the photos I've confiscated... After seeing these, you should be able to understand my sorrows."

Casually receiving the photos, Ryūji turned them over to look at the front side.

"Whoa! This is too mean!"

"Sob~"

In the photo, Taiga had much shorter hair than she had now, which was tied to the back of her head, while she stood unenthusiastically by the poolside.

Someone had drawn an arrow pointing towards the chest area of her swimsuit with a marker pen. Ryūji wasn't sure whether it was the bastard who took the picture, or the asshole that sold the picture, but all he could see written on it were the words, "Pathetic bust".

"Pathetic bust... They're being called 'pathetic'! It was only then that I realized how pathetically flat my chest is! "

"Hey... wait a minute! This is only what that guy thinks..."

"But isn't it true!? After looking myself in the mirror, even I thought my chest is tragically flat! Ugh, Damn it!!! "

Taiga began to cry hopelessly, she then lay down flat on the table and said,

"And now I've got to show this flat chest before Kitamura-kun... What time is it now? It's past nine already? There's only 12 hours remaining before the swimming lesson starts... I... don't wanna go..."

Ryūji's eyes shimmered terrifyingly like a blade while he remained silent. He wasn't trying to secretly assault the scantily dressed Taiga, he was quietly thinking to himself...

"Alright. I'll think of something."

"Eh...?"

Taiga lifted her head, her eyes meeting with Ryūji's. He nodded heavily to Taiga,

"Didn't I already say I'll modify the size for you? I've got a plan. Lend me that swimsuit for the night, it's time to go into nightshift. I'll definitely make sure you can stand with your chest upright before Kitamura!"

"R, Ryūji..."

The vulnerable glitter that was not seen for nearly a week once again appeared in Taiga's eyes. She stared at Ryūji without hesitation, blinking her eyes like an innocent child,

"Are you serious? Why are you helping me?"

"Haven't I already told you? I'm a dragon, and you're a tiger... that's it."

... As if I could tell her that it's to atone for mysteriously having weird thoughts about her.

* * *

"That's enough already, you go sleep first."

"No. I want to stay until you're done."

The pair were now back in the Takasu residence, exchanging the first serious conversation they'd had in a

long time in the narrow apartment. Actually, the conversation was beyond "serious".

"I'll stay awake until you've finished working on it. I'll go play some video games first."

"Taiga... you..."

Taiga gave Ryūji an incredibly warm glance, which could not be simply described as "serious". Before that incident with Ami, Taiga had never spoken so tenderly before.

On top of that...

"It seems... that I was... being moody, and behaving badly too... so... I'm sorry..."

... No matter how annoying, even to the point of nearly abandoning it, a well-protected egg would eventually crack open one day, giving birth to a lovely bird. For someone who was never able to resist those sentimental family serials, this motherly-like warmth stimulated Ryūji's tear glands. Moreover, it helped wash away the slight feeling of guilt that remained within him.

It was half-past-three in the morning, and Ryūji was still giving his all, sewing and knitting the swimsuit.

"What the...? Wait a sec! Wow! What on earth's that!? That's amazing!"

"Ryūji, get back to work already..."

Ryūji turned his head around to see the words "36 COMBO" appear on the TV screen, something he had never seen before while playing Tetris.

Chapter 3

"Last night I noticed that my bellybutton looked a bit filthy while I was taking a bath, so I asked my sister to get me a cotton swab so I could clean it. But now it's all red... You think this'll stick out? Hey, Nototchi! Do you think my bellybutton looks filthy?"

"As if anyone would pay attention to that! I'm the one who should be worrying! Don't you think my armpit hair is a bit too long and dense? You can even see them even with my arms closed! Doesn't that look weird? I even had to trim my chest hair! Hey, Takasu, let's have a look at your armpits!"

"Quit fooling around! ... You look fine, alright? Besides , there's a lot of ways to cover up your bellybutton and armpits... What I'm concerned about is... Do you guys think my nipples look black? Would they get even darker if they're exposed to the sun?"

Sigh...

There stood three male high school students: the laid-back Haruta and his long hair, Noto holding his dark-rimmed glasses wrapped in a towel, and Ryūji,

with his beast-like eyes, staring intently at the nipples of all the other male classmates in swimming trunks. He wasn't going to beat them up, but was just comparing their nipple colors with his own.

The three boys each felt a sense of inferiority over their bodies...

"Whoa~ That looks cold..."

The school rules stipulated that a shower must be taken before entering the pool, so everyone was lined up before the shower taps.

The water that sprayed from the shower head was cold enough to give one goosebumps, but it wasn't like they had another choice.

"Uggggggghhhhhh! It's freezing!!!"

The icy tap water mercilessly rained on Ryūji's sleep deprived skin. He had only slept less than two hours the night before. *I wonder how others are doing?* Ryūji was struggling to open his sleepy eyes as he looked around...

"All I need to do is wash my crotch, right? Wouldn't that be enough?"

Trying his best to avoid contact with water on unnecessary places, Haruta yanked his trunks outward and only soaked that part with water, twitching and screaming at the same time. Noto on the other hand...

"Eek! Cold! I remember someone in elementary school once said 'You can only meditate while standing under a cold water shower'!"

It was amazing that he was able to say something so casual while his teeth chattered... At that moment, someone right next to Noto exclaimed,

"As long as you calm your mind down, the shower would feel warm! *Namo...Amitabhaya...Buddhaya...*"

"So this kind of person exists in high school as well!"

Disregarding the fact that he was still wearing glasses, for some reason, the class representative Kitamura Yūsaku was making a hand seal like a ninja while standing under his shower head. *Is he an idiot?* Without realizing it, Ryūji, like his other classmates, had moved quite a distance away from his good friend while staring at him with disbelief.

"Gah! My glasses!"

The shower water washed Kitamura's glasses off his head, forcing the foolish meditating monk to his knees to chase after them as they were being washed down towards the drain... *Taiga, are you sure this is the man you have a crush on?*

Kitamura from the male perspective was drastically different than that of the females.

"Ahh~ How soothing!"

"Oh! Maruo~! Show us your biceps!"

"Biceps? These?"

Kyaa~ The elated screams of the girls seemed to illuminate the blue summer sky.

The weather is perfect!

The pool surface is glimmering!!

Summer is here!!!

Summer is upon us~!!!

"It's only folks over there that would think that way..."

"Yeah, it's cold over here. Wouldn't it be a bit too early to open the pool in June?"

The gloomy trio sat shoulder to shoulder by the poolside, watching the dazzling girls circling around Kitamura. They kicked their feet in the water, allowing their leg hairs to float. Since swimming class in this school was basically a free activity time, no one would say anything if they swam or just sat by the poolside.

Before this bunch of huddled men, the girls surrounding Kitamura now smiled even more cheerfully. "Your abs look amazing!" "That's right!" Perhaps it had something to do with him participating in club activities, but even from a distance, one could tell that Kitamura had a good build. He already looked fit when wearing his uniform, but he gave off a different aura when he was not wearing it. On top of that, he had quite a

good-looking face once he took off his glasses, as well as eyes that dazzled under the sunlight. Overall, he looked fantastic.

"Maruo looks better without glasses. Why don't you try wearing contacts instead?"

Kihara Maya suggested, holding onto a beach ball while floating in the pool, giving Kitamura a cheerful smile.

"Hey, I'm not wearing glasses either... Why do I get the feeling that I'm invisible to the girls? ... Can they see me? Am I really here?"

"Compared to someone whose sight would cause people to flee in terror, you're much better."

"Alright, alright! Both of you, stop acting as though you're attending your funeral already!"

Sitting between Noto and Ryūji, Haruta placed his hand on their shoulders, as though trying to pass his positive energy onto them. Ahead of this gross male trio... .

"Kyaa! Sheeze! Stop it already!"

"Wah! It's cold!"

...Was the sound of laughter, the splashing of water, and the happy shrieks of the girls.

Splashing the water with her hands, Maya had most of her long straight hair bundled lightly with a hair clip, while the remaining hair hung wet from her neck. She looked quite gorgeous. She wore a black halterneck swimsuit, completely revealing her back. Her slim shoulders and the curve of her back glowed in the sunlight.

"... 83 points!"

"And here we go! Notocchi's already given a score of over 80. Hmm, 85!"

"You guys really do like Kihara. As for me... 77."

"That low? Hmm, I guess Takasu doesn't really fancy feisty girls, huh?"

"I wouldn't really call it fancy... More like afraid..."

"Oh yeah, I think I understand how that feels." Ryūji's friends agreed at once, although from a bystander's point

of view, it made more sense that the person who they should've been afraid of was Ryūji. Nevertheless, this flaw appeared to be negated by their friendship...

"Maruo just doesn't look like Maruo without his glasses! I still think you look better with them on." said Kashii Nanako, the other attractive girl of Class 2-C and a good friend of Maya's. She was strolling casually by the poolside before stopping by Kitamura's side.

"Huh? Why don't you come in the pool Kashii?" asked Kitamura, given the aristocratic title of "Maruo" as a sign of affection by the girls. Nanako shook her head and replied while making a gesture that could only be described as elegant,

"I got caught applying lotion by the teacher, and he said I'm not allowed to get in the water. What a bummer. "

As Nanako did not intend to swim, her curly hair flowed freely over her shoulders. Even the birthmark by her lips looked glamorous. Nanako's figure was slightly more endowed than Maya's, her slim body curves clad in a purplish-blue swimsuit, tied onto her shoulders in butterfly knots.

"I wanna remove that! 86!"

"I wanna remove that! 81!"

"It looks like a butterfly knot, but it's probably sewn on ... 85."

"Uh huh..." The three of them all nodded, staring at each other and smiling, even though the eyes of one of the boys looked far more dangerous than those of the average pervert...

And then...

"Oh, Ami-tan's here! No way! She's so cute! And thin!"

"I'm sorry, Maya-chan. I couldn't tie my hair up. That's why I took so long."

Haruta quickly leaned as far forward as he could.

Noto took out the glasses from his towel and put them on.

For the sake of his two friends, Ryūji slowly moved backwards with an ambiguous expression.

"I'm so excited! I love swimming. This is my first time having swimming lessons with everyone since we met. It'll be worth remembering so I'm looking forward to it!"

Ami appeared, standing with her feet pointing inwards while revealing her innocent angelic smile, and swung her arms towards the other girls in an exaggerated way.

The body wrapped underneath the swimsuit she had bought yesterday was so perfect in a matter-of-fact way that it caught everyone's attention.

"I'm... so moved!"

"It's like seeing an angel!"

Haruta and Noto secretly applauded, while Ryūji was the only one that looked stunned...

Heh heh heh! Today, Ami-chan is, of course, super-duper cute as well! Behold, you foolish mortals! I permit you to bow in the presence of the angel and lick my shadow, since it's probably the most generous gift you could ever receive! Oh ho ho ho ho!

The real side of Ami flashed in Ryūji's mind, although in reality, Ami's appearance was flawless, and there was no hint as to what she was really thinking.

"Ah~ I feel like swimming! I haven't gone to the gym ever since I moved here. I think I'll swim till I drop!"

Ami moved as elegantly as a ballerina. After stretching her arms and legs, she briskly walked towards the starting platform.

"Hey! Ami, you have to do your warm-ups properly!"

"I know that already! Yūsaku, you sure can be bothersome." Ami gave a simple reply to her childhood friend's advice.

"Wow... awesome!"

It was only natural for Haruta to exclaim in awe, as Ami dived into the water with perfect posture. Everyone expected her to quickly emerge from the water. Instead, she accelerated, and gracefully swam 25 meters in one breath. This showed that she was already used to

swimming. She then touched the wall and spun gracefully, and used the butterfly stroke on the return trip.

Even Ryūji was awestruck. She had the speed of a dolphin, graceful movements, and even the droplets of water from her splashes glittered like gems...

"HA! Ow... my eyes sure hurt without goggles!"

As Ami climbed out of the pool after catching a few breaths...

"Eh? What's going on?"

Everyone applauded thunderously. Ami widened her eyes and tilted her head, as though looking troubled - this was a sign that she knew very well that this was applause for her performance just now.

"Eh~? Really... cut it out~ It's embarrassing! I only swim once every time I work out, that's all... I should be the one applauding for everyone's kindness!"

Ami started clapping her hands while blushing, causing the crowd to go into another uproar. "So adorable!" "So gentle!" "Ami-chan's like an angel!"

"Oh wow... I feel so glad to be in the same class as Ami-chan! Right Notocchi? Right Takasu? Hey Takasu, what's wrong with your eyes?"

"It, it's nothing, they always look that way..."

"Well, anyway... the pool is really a great place!"

Noto was now happily kicking the water, causing droplets to splash onto his glasses. Agreeing with his statement, Haruta and Ryūji began kicking too.

"It's a great place!"

"It's a great place!"

... Summer has finally arrived.

This is what swimming lessons look like. There's probably no class happier than this! To put it another way, this is like the cherry on top of the sundae!

Usually we only see the girls in their uniforms, and can only imagine what their figures are like. The skin around their chest, their inner thighs, their bottom, and their armpits... We would

always imagine. This is the only time of the year we can appreciate them fully. Not to mention that since this swimming lesson is mostly playtime, there are no annoying exams, and there is no division of classes according to grades. For the students, there's nothing more enjoyable than enjoying a cozy PE lesson.

That said, Ami, Maya and Nanako aren't the only girls in the class.

"Hmm... 10, 10, 15, 20... That bunch over there don't even look like they're trying! They'll need to do better..."

And there's more,

"55, 54... Hmm... 48. Why do girls with the same level of cuteness always congregate? Anyway, this bunch is just above-average!"

So is our job to sit here and ruthlessly give out scores and comments?

"By the way, what's Koigakubo doing here? Doesn't she teach English?"

Following Noto's gaze, they found Koigakubo Yuri (29 , single) dressed in sports gear. She was holding an

umbrella, and was wearing a pair of gloves, a hat, and sunglasses - basically anything that could be used to block UV rays. Right now, she stood amongst the girls that sat by the poolside, observing the action in the pool. Haruta lifted his head to get a better look at her, and then smiled,

"She's probably after Muscle Kuro!"

Haruta pointed with his chin towards the male PE teacher with the amazing nickname (*I think his name's Kuroma... something. Can't remember properly.*) He rested his tanned muscles by the poolside, perhaps to tan them even more. The eyes behind the sunglasses of their single homeroom teacher stared at his reliable-looking back, which glistened with lotion... *That's probably how it is.* Ryūji couldn't help but sigh.

"She's really going all out. Though it seems pitiable..."

"Doesn't she? According to my secret sources, Yuri's birthday is in September. She's probably planning to date the first month, and get married by the second month, just before she turns 30... That's what I think anyway. But does she really have to rush this? Besides, it doesn't have to be Muscle Kuro, does it? If Yuri came up to me and

said, 'Haruta-kun, please go out with me!' I'd probably agree right away!"

"I already feel hot just hearing about Koigakubo's hard work and Haruta's fantasies. Let's go for a swim, Takasu! "

"Hey, don't say that! I'm coming too!"

It was time to cool off their sun-scorched skins. The three boys jumped into the pool. Although it had felt cold a while ago, the water now felt just right for Ryūji. Maybe it was because of the fiery gaze of their homeroom teacher or the nonsense his friend spoke of.

"Okay! Let's try holding our breaths! We'll swim to the other end like that, and the last one will have to treat us with drinks!"

"No problem! Bring it on!"

"Then let's get started! Ready... get set..."

A second after putting his head into the water in preparation...

"Pffft!" Ryūji had already betrayed his friends, and exhaled all the air that he saved up in his lungs. He grabbed the edge of the pool with both arms, and didn't even bother to look at his friends, who were still holding their breaths. His round eyes flashed a dangerous glint. It wasn't because he had consumed stimulants, but because *she* had arrived.

No one could have guessed what Ryūji was thinking.

For a while now, he had been on the constant lookout for her...

He was constantly worried... *Where is she?*

"Hey, Takasu-kun~! How's the water? Is it cold?"

The person running over was even more dazzling than the sun, and came with a smile most befitting of the midsummer day...

"Minorin! Don't run! My hair'll get messed up again!"

Taiga followed behind her, like a Chinese doll. She had wrapped her hair into two buns above her ears, covering the swimsuit she wore with a tracksuit jacket. Upon seeing Ryūji, she nodded gently as though nothing had happened. Ryūji too nodded in response, while trying to confirm if *that* which he worked all night on was working properly.

Hold on a sec, now's not the time for that. Minori's smiling at me! The way she waved her hand and ran energetically towards him felt like a stop-motion animation.

With her hair tied in a high ponytail, Minori wore a proper dark-blue swimsuit. *She doesn't need to lose any weight at all!* Her waist was beautiful and firm, while the bust under her swimsuit was quite well endowed. Perhaps it had something to do with her being on a sports team, but the skin from her biceps to her fingers,

and from her thighs to her ankles (just above where her socks would be) was slightly tanned.

"Ahahaha! I was trying to run around the pool once as warm-up!"

"Whoa!"

Before Ryūji's intoxicated gaze, Minori first looked as though she wanted to continue running, but instead turned and dashed towards the pool. *Splash!* Still smiling, she jumped straight into the water, creating a huge splash.

"M, Minorin!"

The sight even stunned Taiga.

"Ahahaha~ Feels great!"

Minori emerged from the water, and waved her hand at Ryūji, who was standing just beside her.

"Yo!"

"By the way, Taiga, give me your hand, I need to get out."

"Okay..."

"Just kidding!"

Splash! As Minori prepared to climb out of the pool, she suddenly let go of Taiga's hand, and jumped back into the water backwards... or more accurately, she fell into the water.

"Ahahahahahaha..."

Like a submarine, Minori quickly floated back to the surface, without a hint of concern that her hair was now all messed up, and laughed heartily. *Is this the same Minori that was feeling depressed about how she'd look in a swimsuit just yesterday?*

As though hearing Ryūji's thoughts, Minori, who was now all wet, gave Ryūji a thumbs-up, "Yay!"

"Heh heh, Takasu-kun, I thought about it. As long as I'm in the pool, no one will be able to see my stomach! So I'm gonna swim now, see ya!"

She then swam away in a messed-up breaststroke.

"W... what on earth just happened?"

Ryūji could only watch her depart with his jaw agape. He then realized, *I only saw Minori fully in her swimsuit for only two seconds!* And because he was too shocked by her sudden entrance, even those two seconds of memory were becoming blurry.

"Damn..."

"Such a hopeless expression... You really are a perverted dog!"

As he came to, he noticed Taiga, still wrapped in a tracksuit jacket, siting like a statue by the poolside.

"Cold..."

She pouted as she dipped her feet into the water. Seeing that face, Ryūji couldn't resist...

"Take this!"

"Wah!"

He shaped his hand like a gun and squirted water at Taiga - this was a super high pressure water gun that Ryūji had devised when he was in sixth grade. Taiga

blinked her eyes incessantly, wiping her wet face with the sleeve of her tracksuit jacket, and then yelled,

"W, what do you think you're doing, idiot!?"

"Since you came all the way to swim, don't make such an unenthusiastic face!"

"That's none of your business! I just hate the swimming pool!"

Taiga began kicking her white legs and splashed at Ryūji... forming a two meter high column of water.

"Bwah! Stop it!"

"Ha! This is payback for just now!"

What kind of payback is this when you're just sitting casually by the poolside?

"Oh yeah? Take this!"

Ryūji suddenly splashed a big wave of water at Taiga, who quickly dodged it.

"Bwah!"

That blow was unfortunately taken by Kitamura, who had suddenly stepped behind Taiga without them knowing.

"I've got water in my nose! That took me by surprise. Are you two fighting again?"

At that moment, Taiga...

"T, Taiga?"

Her crush had suddenly appeared in a pair of swimming trunks, glassless, and with a body that even his fellow men would envy, with a face that was so awesome that one could no longer just call him "Maruo". Taiga quickly placed the hood of her tracksuit jacket over her head, and zipped the tracksuit all the way up to her nose. She trembled uneasily, not daring to make a sound.

"Hmm? What's wrong? Aisaka... it's Aisaka, right? I can't see properly without my glasses, but such a small figure, you've got to be Aisaka! What are you hiding your face for? I was about to say how that hair of yours resembled a little mouse. It looks good! Is something wrong? You feel okay?"

It was a good thing he did not see Taiga looking agonized, twitching frantically,

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Taiga replied repeatedly. She even added "Go away!", something she would definitely regret later.

"Huh? Did I say something I shouldn't have said? Why is she acting so cold? Takasu, did I say something wrong ? Tell me already."

Taiga didn't even notice Kitamura's troubled expression - or rather, her hood prevented him from noticing.

Standing in the pool, Ryūji could only shrug his shoulders.

"That's enough! Leave me alone!"

Taiga twitched her body even more, like a shark shaking in agony on a boat deck after having its fins cut off. Finally, Kitamura was driven away by her.

Splash! Taiga washed her burning-red face with the swimming pool water.

"Uwaaaaah! I thought I was gonna die!"

"Hey, what do you think you were doing!? That was such a great chance to talk to him! Don't get me involved if you go and complain later on!"

"No! T, t, t, that's because... it's embarrassing!"

Splash! Splash! She quickly splashed even more water onto her face, even her bangs were soaked wet.

"... Hee hee hee, he said my head looks cute, right?"

"He didn't say it looks cute, he said it looks good."

"He said it looks good, right... Hee hee..."

"Didn't he already say he couldn't see properly without his glasses on?"

"He said it looked like a little mouse... that means it's cute, right? Hee hee!"

Taiga gently caressed her hair and smiled while tilting her head. Her face resembled a sleepy kitten. As a result of putting the hood over her head, the hair, which she had spent a lot of time tying up was now messed up,

though Taiga didn't have time to worry about such matters.

Sigh, Ryūji scratched his head. *Even when summer has arrived and the pool has opened, Taiga is still the same as ever.*

At least it's still peaceful.

The pool surface glitters in flashes of blue, and the voices of laughter between friends echo around.

It's a fine, windless day.

One could feel the footsteps of summer approaching.

And that is enough. Ryūji glanced at Taiga, who caressed her bangs, and nodded, *Yup. This life is the best.*

Taiga was swooning over Kitamura. As for Minori... she was learning some sort of crocodile stroke, scaring Maya and the others playing with the beach ball. Kitamura, who held the attendance list in his hand, was talking to Muscle Kuro. Haruta and Noto stared at Taiga, not daring to approach. The homeroom teacher was staring intently at Muscle Kuro... *Huh? Where did Ami go?*

"Oh my~ Aisaka-san? You've finally come? And I thought you would never appear, could it be because your swimsuit is too loose and you didn't dare come out? "

Here she is.

Ami tied her wet hair in a bundle, which was dripping water everywhere. The way she smiled under the sunlight felt exactly like a sun lotion commercial, yet the way she spoke sweetly was pissing people off.

Ryūji stared painfully at the two girls... *Such a hard earned peaceful day has once again been disrupted by the vicious showdown between the tiger and the chihuahua.*

"Swimsuit size? What are you talking about? Are you still sleep walking and haven't woken up yet?"

Taiga instantly returned to calmness. Her eyes were full of contempt, although her mouth formed a carefree smile. *That's right! Right now, Taiga no longer had anything to worry about (concerning swimsuits)!*

"Forget it. Dummies would always say foolish things. Besides, I'm feeling a bit hot, perhaps I'll take off this jacket!"

Taiga stood up and removed the tracksuit jacket that was wrapping her tiny body.

She stood proudly with her chest raised, her limbs fully exposed under the sunlight. Although she was small in stature, her proportions were as delicate as a doll's, with no extra flesh exposed. Renowned as a fierce tiger, Taiga now wore only a dangerous and thin swimsuit...

The pool was silent for a few seconds...

"Oooohhhh!!!" Everyone finally exclaimed. Ryūji was certain he didn't hear that incorrectly.

"Ugh!" Ami covered her mouth. The glances of her classmate were now focused on Taiga's white skin.

Like Ryūji before, everyone had thought that *In her swimsuit, the Palmtop Tiger would look no different from a*

little kid. They thought that because she was thin and small, her chest would be so flat and uncharacteristic that one would weep tears of sympathy for her.

However, lo and behold!

"Oh man, I really don't want to stand under the sun... My skin will get dark."

Her melancholic eyebrows cast a shadow over her face . Whenever she turned her waist, softly stretching her back and crossing her long legs, one could tell just how slim she was. Yet she still had the curves of a female. On top of that... *Well? What do you guys think about those breasts? Hmm?* Ryūji's face revealed a smile of a death-row prisoner resigned to his fate.

A perfectly awesome outcome!

They weren't big, but they weren't small either. In any case, her swimsuit bulged naturally, forming a perfect cup-shape on both sides. Although she looked unfazed, Taiga still proudly raised her chest, and bounced her soft breasts.

These were the masterpieces Ryūji had spent all night working on - the "phony breast pads".

After obtaining breast pads from clothes that Yasuko no longer wore, Ryūji slightly adjusted the thickness, cutting out a smooth curve before folding it and sewing the folded parts together. It was sewn so perfectly that even an expert wouldn't have been able to find the stitching. Finally, the pads were fitted onto the swimsuit with veiled buttons. Because it looked so natural, even Taiga blushed after she tried it on. She even swore to Ryūji that she would definitely wear this on her wedding day (Even though it was already 4 in the morning when she had said that...)

"Hmph... Turns out she's got a normal figure after all, how boring! Anyway, her size is still too small!"

Ami muttered quietly, quickly losing her interest and revealing her devious nature. "What an idiot!" Taiga replied with her face turned away from Ami.

"Good work..."

Taiga gave a subtle V-sign to Ryūji, to which he also replied with underwater.

The male classmates began to murmur amongst themselves, since most of them had probably seen that "

pathetic bust" photo from the previous year. "She actually grew that much in the space of a year..." " Confirmation of breast growth verified..." "I definitely like the tiger better..." It seemed like everyone had been successfully fooled. Taiga was in an unusually good mood as she beamed brightly and returned to sitting by the poolside, placing her legs into the water.

"Ryūji, teach me how to do that just now. The thing where you squirt water out. I want to try it on Minorin as well."

She asked while clutching her hands. *Does she mean the water gun?*

"Oh! First you hold your hands tightly together, and then you place them in the water..."

"Like this?"

Taiga obediently held her hands as Ryūji instructed and bent forward, placing them into the water. *Gotcha...* Ryūji aimed at the face that approached him and...

"Like this!"

Squirt!

"Uwah! ... Why you-!"

Taiga wiped her wet face with the back of her hand, and glared at Ryūji,

"Alright then... Allow me to return the favor. Stay right there..."

Taiga followed Ryūji and grabbed her hands. She squeezed tightly, *Squirt!* and fired the water...

"Wah!"

... Into her own face. *How clumsy. Almost to the point of being dumb.* Ryūji couldn't help but laugh out loud, and prepared to move in for the kill.

"Yup! That's it! Why can't you do it? Huh? I wonder?"

"Wah! Wait! Uwah! Ryūji! Don't you think you can... ahh!"

Taiga tried to dodge frantically, but because she couldn't open her eyes or stand up, she could only shield her face with her hands. Ryūji wondered if this was the first time he had ever bested Taiga.

"You see, you see? Like this!"

As the old saying goes, pride goes before a fall.

"Hey! Stop bullying Taiga!!!"

"Whoa!"

Splash! Ryūji felt a strong impact on his nose, as water entered through it and into his throat. It took Ryūji a few seconds to realize what had just happened, and a few more to realize it was fired by Minori, who was standing quite a distance away.

"Ahahahaha! How's that? This is the secret power of the Kushieda Water Gun, passed down through the generations!"

"H, how'd you do that!? Cause it sure damn hurts!"

"I ain't telling someone who bullied Taiga! Bleh!"

"Yay!" Minori made a V-sign, and skillfully swam to the deepest part in the middle of the pool. *As expected from the mad dog that rules supreme over the Kanto region... No, it has more to do with her amazing arms and her natural athleticism in any sport.*

"Minorin, thanks for saving me!"

Taiga's eyes glittered passionately, smiling at her savior, but Minori only took one glance at Taiga and snickered,

"Fake Breast Trooper..."

Leaving with that comment, she submerged into the water like a crocodile on the hunt. After her suspicious-looking silhouette went away, Ryūji said,

"S, she found out already..."

"As expected from Minorin..."

Ryūji and Taiga could not help but envision themselves trembling, standing shoulder to shoulder by the poolside holding hands.

At that moment, at the other end of the pool... *Splash!* Sounds of splashing water startled Ryūji, who turned to take a look.

"Wahahahaha! How's that? It's not fair that you're the only one that's popular!"

"We're deeply unsatisfied with this biased treatment!"

Noto and Haruta smiled evilly by the poolside. Kitamura, who looked dejected after being driven away by Taiga (or was he?), emerged from the water,

"Cough! Cough! Why you two... Come back here! It's my turn to strike back!"

It took Kitamura just two strokes before reaching the poolside, and he quickly climbed up and grabbed Noto, who was trying to escape. Disregarding his status as the class representative, he lifted Noto high in the air, and prepared to give him a backbreaker throw.

"S, s, s, stop! My glasses, my glasses... WHOOOAAAAHHH!!!"

"This is summer, folks! Hah!!!"

Without hesitation, Kitamura raised his chest and tossed Noto towards the pool with his back facing the water, creating a massive water column. At the same time, Haruta was also grabbed by someone else on the other end, unable to move his arms and legs. He could only wait to be thrown in as well...

"You're going in as well! Hell Cradle!!!"

SPLOOSH!

"Come! Let the festival begin!"

"You're all going in!"

In an instant, the poolside became hell on earth. Those already in the water were smacked by the people being thrown in, and those trying to climb out were quickly kicked back in as well.

"Kyaa! Stop it, stop it, stop it... Nooo!!!"

Even Nanako, who decided to have an afternoon nap, was tossed in. Without regard to male or female gender, the battle royale had begun.

"Uwah! Isn't this a bit dangerous?"

Ryūji exclaimed, as he was soaked wet by the splash caused by his classmates falling into the pool. Just when he had climbed up with one foot out of the pool...

"Target spotted!"

"Go get 'em! My softball teammate!"

"Huh? Wha! Wha, wha, whoooaaa!!!"

On his right was Minori, while on his left was Kitamura. By the time he realized, Ryūji's arms were locked tight by the both of them, and he found himself flying in mid-air before landing in the pool on his back.

Struggling painfully out of the white bubbles, it took Ryūji some time to finally emerge from the water.

"W, why you two...! Cough! Cough!"

The Softball Duo had already gone off in search of their next prey... "Wha!? No way!? You got to be kidding meeee!!!" *That sounded like Maya screaming...*

Standing before Ryūji, Taiga was laughing heartily.

"Yay!!! You finally fell! Feels great to be touched by Minorin's hands, doesn't it?"

She looked down happily at Ryūji. *It seems like no one would dare touch this Palmtop Tiger...* And it seemed like Taiga thought so as well, which explained her carefree look.

"W, why you... In that case I'll just toss you..."

Just as he was about to finish...

"There. You. Are~. Looks like someone still hasn't been thrown in the water~"

A most malicious voice came from behind Taiga. *This means, there's still that master of troublemaking - Kawashima Ami.*

"You...!"

Completely defenseless and caught by surprise, Ami lifted Taiga by her waist before she could even react.

"Let's play~! Nothing personal, you know~? Here goes ~!"

SPLOOSH! Taiga was thrown into the pool, creating a huge splash as she sank to the bottom.

"Ahahaha! Serves you right-!"

"D, do you think there's still time for you to say such carefree stuff!? Hurry up and run!"

"Heh heh! Ami-chan would like to see that cocky tiger with a pathetic crying face with Ami-chan's own eyes!"

Ami leapt about cheerfully, but Taiga did not emerge. All that could be seen were some bubbles floating to the surface, which eventually disappeared as well.

"...Eh? Eh!?"

As Ryūji wondered how long eternity would actually last, he thought, *Come to think of it, Taiga said something... what was it? I remember... that moment... Yeah, I remember asking her, "Why do you hate the swimming pool so much?" And Taiga replied, "You listen carefully! It's because I can't swim, that's why I hate it!"*

Hmm... This means...

"She really can't swim!? She's gonna drown!"

"Ehh!? Really!?"

Ami's face instantly went pale. Ryūji quickly dived into the pool.

After making three hard hand strokes, he finally grabbed Taiga, who was wrapped up like a ball, and returned to the surface all in one breath.

"Buwah! Hey! You alright!? Hey, hey, hey, hey!!!"

"N, n, n, n, noooo! D, d, do-rrrr-n't...!!!"

Taiga began to struggle and thrash violently, trying to escape from Ryūji's arms. Ryūji's chin was hit, and the two of them sank back into the water again. A lot of water was entering her nose, but Taiga didn't seem to care. She was focused on escaping. Ryūji tried to lift Taiga up, allowing her face to come out of the water...

"This is baaa-rrrr-d! Hic! Hic! Cough! Cough! It's dro-rrr-ped!!!"

"W, what are you talking abo-rrrr-ut!? Cough! Cough!"

Water kept entering Taiga's mouth, but she still seemed intent on looking for something. She didn't even grab on Ryūji's hands, as her arms were clutched in front of her chest, as if she was trying to conceal something...

"N, no wa-rrrrrr-y!?"

"It's dro-rrrrr-ped! There's only one side le-rrrrr-ft!"

When she said "dropped", she meant that*, right? Yeah, that...*

"EEHH!?"

That... one of the phony breast pads floated a few metres before them. With one hand holding Taiga, Ryūji swam frantically to retrieve it before anyone saw it...

"Are you kidding me? Why didn't you say so if you couldn't swim!?"

"Ah!!! Don't come overrrrrrrr!!!"

Seeing how Taiga and Ryūji were struggling in the water, Ami thought they were drowning. She dived gracefully into the water in an attempt to rescue the sinking duo. *Oh crap! At this rate, she'll discover that Taiga has a pad on one side and none on the other! God knows what she'll say if she ever finds out... Here it goes!*

"WAH!?"

Ryūji suddenly pulled Taiga into the water, and in a matter of seconds, pulled out the front of the struggling Taiga's swimsuit in the most delicate manner possible.

He then stuck his hand inside the warm swimsuit, and placed the breast pad back to its original position... *There's no other choice,* He felt like he touched something... *But I guess it can't be helped.*

At that moment, Ryūji knew at once that Taiga was roaring furiously in the water, as massive bubbles began to erupt from her tiger jaws.

* * *

"Huh? What happened?"

"Ami-chan pushed the Palmtop Tiger into the pool..."

"No way! That's suicide!"

The classmates quietly gossiped, although things were not as simple as they thought.

"I already told you I didn't know you couldn't swim! Besides, haven't I apologized to you already?"

"This isn't something that can be settled by a mere apology..."

Too exhausted to even roar at Ami, Taiga could only lean on the table, the eyes within her damp hair occasionally glittering with tears.

Ryūji could only stand petrified as he watched the two exchange words. *She's right. This isn't something that can be settled by an apology.*

After *that* happened, Taiga only said two words as she was pulled out of the water, "How mortifying." She not only meant being pushed into the pool, but also *that thing* which Ryūji did to her. *This was done for her own good, although in hindsight, it did seem mean. I think I may have touched, as well as saw, something that resembled a flat horizon...*

"It's, it's your own fault. If it wasn't for that stupid move, I wouldn't have... have..."

"Wouldn't have what? Did something happen?"

"In any case, just apologize! Apologize! Apologize! APOLOGIZE!!!!!"

Taiga was latched onto the table as she rocked it vigorously. For the Palmtop Tiger, this demonstration of wrath seemed to be lacking something. No one else knew that it was because she felt absolutely humiliated from her breasts (seemingly) being exposed... Besides Ryūji, that is.

"Really, what do you want me to do? Haven't I been apologizing all this time already?"

Ami, who had been wearing her angelic mask while being confronted by Taiga, was starting to get annoyed. *Hmph!* A vague sneer appeared at the corner of her lips,

"Come to think of it, I never knew Aisaka-san was such a landlubber... How pitiful~ You poor thing~ You must have suffered a lot, haven't you~? Like being asked to stay behind in class because you can't swim?"

Ami lowered her voice and had begun her irritating " fake sympathy" attack. Realizing that no one else was around to notice, she nodded while speaking in a sweet voice "I see~." Paying attention to the glances around her, she continued with something even more spiteful,

"Summer is here and you can't swim. Wouldn't that mean you couldn't go to the beach or the swimming pool ? What a shame! Takasu-kun, why don't we go together~ ?

"

I have no idea what sort of logic she's using to come to such a conclusion. Ami had begun to use her most effective method when confronting Taiga: Teasing Ryūji, although Ryūji would ultimately be the one ending up feeling troubled.

"Huh... why is Ami-chan inviting Takasu on her own...?"

"Why does it have to be Takasu!?"

Having witnessed the whole thing all along, the glances of the classmates suddenly turned hostile. *No, wait a minute...* Ryūji attempted to wipe his hands clear of this affair...

"That's right! Takasu-kun, my family has a mansion~! You want to come have fun with me there?"

"Eh?"

Ami walked directly in front of Taiga and straight towards Ryūji's side,

"Well, that's decided! Okay?"

The chihuahua tilted her head, her watery eyes glimmering. The mood in the classroom turned dark,

"Why Takasu of all people!? How come he could go to her mansion!? Why, Ami-chan, why!?"

"Wait a moment! Why is this turning into me spending the summer with you!? Aren't you supposed to be apologizing to Taiga?"

"Hmm? Was I?"

Seems like I forgot~ Ami gestured with her clumsy-looking smile, and softly knocked her head with her fists.

Taiga suddenly stood up behind them,

"Spare the apology! How mundane! You can go wherever you want and do whatever you please for all I care, you lowlife couple!"

After finishing, she separated the crowd like Moses did to the Red Sea, and walked through the aisle that had formed in between. Feeling a bit annoyed, Ami pouted, but did not stop her assault,

"Remember to come, Takasu-kun! I'm sure we'll have lots of fun! We'll spend the whole summer there!"

"Isn't that enough for you already..."

"Eh... you can't? Then... that's right, you wouldn't complain if Yūsaku came along as well, would you?"

Taiga forcefully stopped her tracks, turned around and walked back in great strides past the onlookers.

"Whoa!?"

Taiga remained silent, and grabbed the wrist of Ryūji, who Ami was leaning upon.

"Oh my~"

"What now..."

Making another turn, Taiga now had Ryūji behind her back. Ami seemed to have seen something amusing, and gleefully squinted her eyes. Although it was recess time, the classroom was so silent that one might of thought that the Titanic had just sunk. It was so quiet that noises from the class next door could be heard. It was understandable, since for everyone else, what they saw was basically "the Palmtop Tiger forcefully snatching Takasu from Ami-chan's side"... They could only gulp in silence.

Only Ryūji knew, the reason Taiga turned around was not because of him, but because Ami said "Yūsaku is coming along as well".

"What is it now, Aisaka-san?"

"I can't allow you to decide on your own..."

"That wasn't what you said earlier. Didn't you say we could go wherever we want and do whatever we please? "

"If it's for the whole summer, then it'll be another matter. But Ryūji is in charge of my meals, plus all other matters, so I can't let him go with you."

"Oh my... So you're basically saying 'Ryūji is mine'? How bold of you!"

"I never said that. And who would, anyway? Shouldn't you go and have your ears examined? Or should I help dig all the earwax out of your ears?"

Ami looked down with her lips twitching.

Taiga looked up with her chest puffed-up.

Ryūji no longer remained in their sights; the situation was close to critical mass.

The first to move was Taiga. She took a huge step forward. A sweet smile appeared on her beautiful, white face. She stood on her tip-toes and whispered to Ami's ear,

"If you go about starting funny business, I'll release that video of your 100 sessions of monomane medley to the public... No wait, it's 150 sessions, right?"

Ami's face was quickly shrouded by a dark complexion, although as expected of her angelic mask, she rebounded just as fast. Ami smiled gently, bent down and cheerfully whispered into Taiga's ear,

"If you do that, then I'll sue you for breach of my image rights... Not even a Palmtop Tiger can escape the clutches of the law, can she?"

"Hu... hu hu hu"

"Ahaha..."

"Uhuhuhuhuhuhu..."

"Ahahahahahaha..."

Under everyone's gaze, the veins in their foreheads looked as though they were about to burst.

"Stop this at once! ... Your fists will get hurt that way!"

"M, Minorin!?"

Minori charged in between them without regard for her life, and tightly held onto the fist Taiga was about to strike with.

"Come on! Split up! Split up now!"

Shoving Taiga and Ami's chest, Minori separated the two until they were some distance away from each other, and then started sermonizing them,

"Taiga, Kawashima-san, this is just too much! I won't forcefully ask you to be friends with each other, but don't you think your relationship with each other is a bit too terrible? Not even I can stand and watch this any longer!"

"But, but, listen to me, Minori-chan! It's because Aisaka-san treated me like..."

"It's all that stupid chihuahua's fault! Why'd you have to transfer to our school!? Why must you live in this world!?"

"ENOUGH! Shut up, both of you! Let go, Taiga! Stop grabbing her collar! You can't start a fight just like that! I know you're trying to win sympathy with your fists, in that case, let's settle this in a sports duel!"

"EHHHH!?" Taiga was the only one that exclaimed. Including Ryūji, everyone remained silent, and tilted their heads in confusion. They couldn't figure out what logic Minori had used to come to such a conclusion. Unexpectedly, Ami laughed cheerfully,

"Oh my, sounds interesting~"

She masterfully flashed her shimmering smile to the whole class,

"Listen to me! I want to let everyone understand that I genuinely want to be friends with Aisaka-san! I was envious of how she got along so well with Takasu-kun, and I ended up saying a lot of things that would cause a lot of misunderstandings with him. But I really want to be friends with her! ... It's all my fault, or things wouldn't have turned out this way... But, but... I'm serious!"

The mask that was nearly ripped off in the ruckus a while ago had now been skillfully repaired with the application of some sweet words.

"She's right. How could Ami-chan possibly be interested in Takasu?" Hearing these whispers, Ami smiled once again. Ryūji knew that was a face that read, " Just as planned."

Taiga was the only one who couldn't accept this,

"Why!? Why!? What the hell is this? Don't be ridiculous! There's a limit to absurdity, you know? Why must I have a sports duel with this chihuahua? Don't make me laugh! I'll be the laughingstock of my family if I do that! Why must I do such a thing!? Besides, Minorin, why are you helping her instead of me!?"

"YOU IDIOT!"

"OW!"

Minorin mercilessly gave Taiga a karate chop on her head,

"Taiga, I'm doing this for your own good! You could still get away with your behaviour as a student, but that won't work once you come out to work in society! Are you gonna just give every colleague and co-worker you dislike a fist? Be a good girl, cause I'll be going to

Kawashima-san's mansion as well, and try and improve my friendship with her during the summer! Right, Ami-chan? Kissy~"

"Wah! You really are bold, Minori-chan!"

Hugging Ami tightly, Minori held her white face and kept on kissing it. Some guys can be heard whispering, " Being a girl's great..." Taiga begrudgingly puffed her chest and said,

"Alright! Fine then! Since Minorin says so, I'll accept your challenge! But if I win, we'll be carrying out the premiere of the monomane medley!"

"Then if I win, Takasu-kun will be spending the summer with me in my family mansion~"

And you will end up all alone this summer! No one in the excited crowd had heard the malicious whisper Ami added at the end.

"Now then, here we go!
Badabadabadabadabadabadabadabadabadabada!"

It was amazing to hear a human tongue mimicking the beating of the drums so skillfully. After turning up the atmosphere with her drum beats, Minori closed her eyes, and stuck her hand inside a convenience store plastic bag , stirring her hands around and around. In the bag were two pieces of folded paper of equal size. One of them contained Taiga's preferred duel method, the other Ami's . Both had handwritten the duel they wanted to have.

"TADA!"

The drumbeats ended as Minori drew one paper from within.

Taiga, Ami, Ryūji and everyone else all stared intently at the piece of paper that Minori was unfolding. Everyone had their ears ready to listen to the contents being read out. Under everyone's gazes, she cleared her throat and exclaimed,

"AND THE WINNER ISSSSS...!!!"

A lot of question marks appeared above everyone's heads. *Was she trying to mimic a foreign accent? What was that all about?*

"Oh! You were trying to mimic the late David Jones, right? You know? The well-known foreigner that represents Pan-Am in presenting the Pan-American Sumo Trophy to the winners! You made a good resemblance just now."

Kitamura's explanation just made everyone think *How come you know such stuff?*, and only served to make the confusion worse.

"Just kidding! Anyway, fun time's over. Here it is! The duel will be decided by..."

Minori paused for a while, she first smiled towards Ami, and then frowned towards Taiga,

"'50 m freestyle swimming' as proposed by Kawashima Ami-san!"

"OOOHHHH!!!" There was applause everywhere. " Thank you! I'm so lucky!" Ami smiled and bowed gracefully to everyone's accolades, while Taiga scowled.

Ryūji's terrifying eyes flashed. *This dueling method is too unfair for a landlubber like Taiga.* Whispers were already beginning to spread, "The winner's already decided."

The Day of Destiny was set at the final swimming lesson. Might as well give this a mention, it was rumoured that the dueling method that Taiga proposed but wasn't chosen was supposedly "freestyle combat".

Chapter 4

"I'm really impressed by the students of this class! You're all so diligent, unlike the first-years, who fell asleep after their swimming lessons!"

Standing on the teaching podium, the teacher smiled and looked at the students of Class 2-C. The current atmosphere in the classroom gave no indication that the students had just returned from swimming lessons. Everyone was quietly listening to the lesson being taught with their eyes wide open. Yet the teacher did not realize that within this silence, a peculiar feeling was being transmitted amongst the students like an electric current.

Ryūji was among the students with their eyes wide open. He was unable to read anything in his textbook, as his unnerving anxiety affected his eyes' ability to focus. He only could think about what had happened during recess.

How did it come to this? Why must I be dragged into all of this?

Oh man... As he was chewing on the end of his pencil...

"...Huh?"

A tiny folded note was thrown onto his desk from behind. It seemed like it was originally intended to be thrown to the person sitting in front of Ryūji, but it bounced off the back of that person's chair and landed on Ryūji's desk instead. "Oh shit..." The person behind gasped softly. Just when the kindhearted Ryūji was about to poke the person in front and pass the note to him...

He noticed something written on the outside of the note: "To everyone in Class 2-C!"

Well, I'm a student of Class 2-C as well, so I suppose I can read this too. Using his textbook as a shield, he opened the B5 size note. His usually dangling triangular eyes now gave an even piercing glare as he read:

`The 1st Takasu Cup! Featuring Ami-chan VS`

"What the hell..."

He scanned the classroom with his glaring eyes. "Shit! Who's the idiot that leaked it...!?" "Whoa! Damn that jackass!" Everyone exclaimed as they embarrassingly avoided Ryūji's glance.

Why these people!

Ryūji bit his lips and thought, *Aren't they going a bit too far? Since they think it's got nothing to do with them, they're treating this like a show now, aren't they!?*

There were many signatures indicating their intention to participate in the bet. A line was drawn in the middle of the paper; the left side was labeled "Ami-chan", while the right side was labeled "Tiger." By writing one's name under the label, one would be placing their bet on that contestant.

So far, everyone had placed their bets on Ami, while the column under Taiga's name was completely blank. Everyone also wrote their opinions next to their names:

```
What is there to bet about anyway?
Of course Ami-chan is gonna win in swimmir
If it was a battle royale, then I would ha
The Tiger has no chance! The winner has al
By the way, now that it has come to this,
He's merely the sacrificial pawn in the pc
```

So does this mean Ami-chan wasn't serious

Of course she wasn't! Even if Ami-chan wer

I think the Tiger and Takasu are serious.

Are you an idiot!?

Yeah right. Ami-chan is '**my**' wife!

You can daydream all you like!

I'll be taking Ami-chan, thank you very mu

I'm so~ hungry, is it lunchtime yet?

I wanna join this battle for Ami-chan's he

To arl: Ami-chan is mine, so sorry folks.

Are you trying to spell 'all'?

To Haruta: You can't even spell 'all', jus

To Haruta: Are you only here because of cr

Haruta... You really are an... No, that's not really important ...

"What the hell... Just what on earth are they writing..."

These are all pissing me off. Ryūji's mouth remained shut as his dangerous glare, which he had genetically inherited from his father, glowered in vexation. While he never liked scaring people out of the blue, he didn't like being treated as a laughingstock by the whole class or being looked down upon either.

This was because the girls in particular had written the following:

```
Though Takasu-kun looks scary, he's actual

I agree. Takasu-kun = Hopeless guy. (LOL)

No matter what you do to him, he'll just k

Seems like he's tied onto a tight leash by
```

Unforgivable! This is too mean! I've never realized that the girls have always looked down on me. Not to mention that all those casually written "LOLs" at the end of their comments felt like daggers piercing through his heart.

"Screw this... I'll show you who's a useless bastard..."

Take this! Ryūji took out a thick felt-tip pen and wrote his name in a large font, under Taiga's column, of course. Moreover, he placed six bets on her. *3000 yen! How's that, huh?*

They probably never knew that tigers and dragons are always together as a team, huh? Besides, Ryūji himself was an expert swimmer. As there was still time until the showdown, Ryūji believed that if he gave Taiga special training, coupled with her amazing potential, she just might improve dramatically when she swims against Ami.

"This way, I'll be the big winner in this bet..."

After muttering to himself, he had to do something else even more vexing - team up with Taiga. Ryūji expertly folded the note into a plane shape, and then turned to throw it diagonally behind him.

"Hey, Taiga!"

"Huh? What...is this?"

Gasp! Someone silently exclaimed. The Palmtop Tiger - Aisaka Taiga swiftly caught the paper plane that flew her

way. After opening the note with her tiny white hands, she simply said,

"I see..."

Her cherry lips twisted sinisterly as she said that, and revealed a smile of a savage beast, while licking her lips with a blood-red looking tongue... Even her face was filled with blood, and her pale throat shivered due to the excitement.

"Well then, can someone answer this question? Ah, how admirable! Aisaka, can you answer this?"

Taiga stood up, her eyes were now filled with the predatory instincts of a carnivore, emitting a glower that was bereft of rationality. She savagely scanned every student.

"A-Aisaka? Please don't wobble around in the classroom... Er... You *can* wobble all you like, but shouldn't you try and answer the question as well?"

With her back towards the podium, Taiga moved along the desk aisles. One could almost discern a vision of a two-tonne tiger. Those murderous eyes were now filling the whole classroom with their intensity. "Eek!" "

I'm sorry..." Pleas for mercy echoed around, though she smiled as she walked past Ryūji's desk. Their eyes met, confirming their companionship. However, in the next second, she tripped over a chair and almost fell had Ryūji not caught her by the skirt. She continued to smile and shrugged it off. As she walked towards the podium, she tripped again, and stood up again with the same grin... *Even in this situation, she never forgets her clumsiness.*

Although she was completely oblivious to the situation, even Ami could sense something strange about the atmosphere as she tilted her head and blinked,

"Huh? What happened? Why is she mad?"

Only one person remained silent... and that was Minori, who sat in the aisle beside the entrance.

"Snore...snore..."

If one looked carefully, they would've discovered that her eyes were actually closed, but she had drawn fake eyes onto her eyelids to give the illusion that she was awake.

"Taiga, I'll be supporting you all the way. You mustn't lose!"

"Of course I won't! I'll see to it that the stupid chihuahua gets torn apart like a rotten rag!"

Taiga quickly skimmed through a sports magazine that read "Aiming to be the Next Swimming Champion" on the cover. She looked up and at Ryūji with an annoyed expression on her face, who was holding his cooking chopsticks,

"Of course you'll help me! If I lose to that chihuahua, do you know what will happen to you?"

"Of course I do, spending the whole summer locked up in Kawashima's mansion, right? You gotta be kidding me! Who's gonna do all the laundry, clean the bathroom, prepare the meals, and all the chores? By the way, you ought to be helping out here! Go and mix that bowl of vinegar miso sauce."

Ryūji handed a glass bowl with the seasonings inside and a spoon to Taiga, while he meticulously wiped the small table with his rag.

"What is this for?"

"The Udo and seaweed."

"Ugh! I hate that!"

"But it's good for you! It can make breasts larger."

"Stop lying, you ugly ogre."

"U...ugly...ogre...!?"

After stinging Ryūji with that remark, Taiga began mixing the ingredients. Sitting on the floor like a child, she stuck her lips outwards and said in a frenzied voice,

"I'm sure you should know already, I..."

"Yeah, yeah...you're right..."

I've heard this topic too many times already. Ryūji continued his chores, as well as preventing Taiga from continuing,

"I know. You were going to say, 'You can go wherever you want and do whatever you please for all I care' anyway, right? I know already! You're pissed that Kitamura will be going as well, aren't you?"

However.

"That's not it... Of course Kitamura-kun going had something to do with it, but the main reason is because I don't want you to go to that woman's mansion."

"Eh..."

Ryūji glanced at the side of Taiga's face. She was getting moody with her cheeks puffed up while mixing the vinegar miso. A question emerged within Ryūji's heart,

Could it be...

Could it be that it's as Ami says, that Taiga...

"Who's going to take care of my meals when you're gone!? Of course, it'll be a different matter altogether if you're willing to come back from the mansion three times a day just for that."

"Ah! I get it. That's right, I see now."

Now why am I making such a weird face? Ryūji whispered to himself, while having no idea whether Taiga heard that or not.

"... Ryū~ji~?"

Wham! Taiga slammed the bowl of vinegar miso on the table, and pointed the spoon stained with the sauce towards the tip of Ryūji's nose, and called out his name slowly as she would to a child,

"Do you even understand your situation at all? You are a dog. My dog. Say it! Say there's nothing more meaningful in life than to serve me like an animal! Say that you never felt like you lived in the past sixteen years before you served me!"

"Wha!? Why on earth would I want to say that!?"

"Say it, you dumbass... When I ask you to do something, you do it as you're told!"

The depths of Taiga's eyes were as dark as a black hole as she gave a gloomy smile,

"You...saw my breasts, didn't you? ...and you touched them, didn't you? ...this humiliation is too mortifying! Every time I think about it, my heart feels like it's about to come out of my nose... For you to do that to me, you won't be able to repay that sin even if you were to serve me for the rest of eternity! Do you understand? I'm the one who's the victim here...get it!?"

Ryūji could say nothing. *For Taiga to say that, what else could I say? ...no, wait...*

"D-Didn't you see my nipples as well!? That's the same thing! And you said I saw yours? Who would have the time to notice such things when we were close to drowning!?"

"What was that? I saw your nipples!? You mean those ridiculously black and filthy raisins?"

"Filthy raisins!?"

Ryūji knelt down in despair at such an original insult. This was by far the most painful insult he had heard from her. "Pfft!" Taiga even pretended to spit in disgust, and then went back to mix the vinegar miso.

"Wah!"

She mixed too hard, causing the spoon to fly off and hit Ryūji directly on the forehead, who was still kneeling on the floor.

"Ow! ...why you...hopelessly klutzy idiot!"

Ryūji said in misery as the miso trickled down his face. At that moment, Yasuko, about to leave for work, entered the living room,

"Oh my~ Isn't dinner prepared yet?"

"Oh, just a moment. It's almost ready."

Ryūji wiped the miso off his face and returned to the kitchen like a submissive housewife who just got abused by her cruel mother-in-law.

As Ryūji was filling the miso soup into the bowls, he heard the two people behind him chatting.

"Wow~ Taiga-chan is mixing the vinegar miso already! You sure can be helpful, such a good girl~"

"R-Really?"

"Ya-chan loves udo the best~!"

Yasuko began to lean towards Taiga. The makeup on her youthful face carried an innocent smile as usual. She seemed cheerful for some reason as she stood in front of Taiga,

"Well, Ya-chan was thinking it's okay for Taiga-chan to see them!"

"Eh? See what?"

Ryūji was preparing to bring the tray filled with the miso soup and dishes towards the small table, and found Yasuko facing Taiga with her back towards him. He looked, not knowing what Yasuko was up to,

"Come. Have. A. Look! Since Taiga-chan looked like she wanted to see them yesterday~!"

He saw his own mother lift her shirt above her breasts.

"WHAT!?"

Barely managing to prevent the tray from falling on the floor, Ryūji could only see Yasuko's pale back, while Taiga stood petrified on the tatami.

Ryūji could only hear Taiga moan uselessly, like a kitten that had been brutally abandoned. *No doubt dumbstruck by the amazing objects before her.*

* * *

Speaking of which, neither Ryūji nor Taiga could afford the time to be awestruck by those enormous breasts.

Three days later and the second swimming lesson came along. The gloomy weather seemed ill suited for swimming, yet both Ryūji and Taiga were fired up,

"Alright, let's go Taiga!"

"Bring it on, Ryūji!"

Ryūji and Taiga appeared by the poolside; their eyes flashed in a white glow, emitting an ultra high temperature murderous intent...sorry, exuberance. The two of them held hands and puffed up their chests (one of them had seemingly fake breasts). The atmosphere quickly changed. The swimming pool was no longer a friendly place to hang about, but a solemn venue where one put their determination, honor and summer vacation on the line.

As Ryūji and Taiga entered the pool, they seemed to be surrounded by a smoke of venomous gas, causing people to naturally create a space in order to avoid them. No one dared to speak to them... Everyone stayed far away while whispering to one another, pretending to watch them casually.

Ryūji squinted his eyes and thought, *I think I have an idea what's going on. Everyone must be thinking how on earth Taiga the land-lubber is going to compete with Ami.* Still, Ryūji decided to ignore their gazes and said,

"Let's get started!"

"Alright!"

Taiga nodded vigorously and communicated telepathically with Ryūji via eye contact, *Don't worry about them. Let them say whatever they like.*

Judging by Taiga's stamina, she should be able to complete 25 meters in no time.

"Listen up, Taiga. Let's start from the simplest of stuff. Try kicking the wall and let yourself float up."

"Ryūji."

"Yes?"

"When you say kick the wall, does that mean I have to let go of my hands first?"

"That's right."

Taiga clutched desperately at the poolside as she glared at Ryūji's face. One could see shades of blue on her pale face.

"I'll drown if I let go."

"..."

"My feet can't touch the bottom."

Looks like we'll have to start from the most basic of basics! So her feet can't touch the bottom, huh... Ryūji pressed his forehead as he attempted to modify his training program . After a few seconds, he said,

"...alright, then let's start with holding breaths. Can you dip your head into the water?"

"Oh, ho, ho," Taiga laughed and replied,

"Seriously, don't treat me like a fool. Of course I can do something that simple! Watch!"

That's good then... As Ryūji breathed a sigh of relief...

"T-Taiga!? Y-You..."

"See?" Taiga beamed proudly as she indeed dipped her face into the water. She held her hands by the poolside, and slowly created bubbles as she sank into the water, with her nose was just above the water. Her wide eyes rolled around on top of the surface and blinked cutely,

"... Buhah! You see? I can do it, right?"

Hmph! She proudly puffed up her phony breasts. Ryūji once again pressed his forehead while thinking of a way to explain the situation to her. After a few seconds,

"You know...when I said dip your head into the water, it should be like this..."

Ryūji also held onto the poolside, and slowly dipped his face into the water and counted to three as he demonstrated to Taiga the proper way to do it.

"Buwah! See? It's different from how you did it? Hey, look over here!"

Taiga had turned her face away, to which Ryūji responded with a jab her to arm.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"Were you even looking at all!? Can you do what I just demonstrated?"

"Eeh!? Umm..."

Although Taiga still looked enthusiastic, her eyes wandered, not daring to look at Ryūji. *You've got to be joking...* Ryūji suddenly had a bad feeling about this,

"Could it be...you wouldn't even dare to dip your head into the water...?"

"...huh? You said something?"

Ryūji looked at Taiga as she turned her head and feigned ignorance while whistling lousily... His premonitions had come true. The problem at hand was no longer about teaching her how to swim, but rather getting her accustomed to the water first.

Ryūji no longer had the time to press his forehead to think. He knocked Taiga on her head, trying to get her motivated, but she didn't even respond with an aggressive "Stop knocking me about!"

"A-Anyway, let's just practice holding breaths! If you can't even master that, you can't do anything else."

Just as Ryūji was about to explain the importance of the basics, the people behind them began to murmur among themselves.

"Did you hear that? She had to start from holding breaths..."

"No matter how you look at it, that's too basic..."

"Isn't that the level of a first grader?"

"She should at least know how to do that..."

Taiga seemed to have heard the whispers of her classmates, which badly bruised her pride... She furrowed her brow, and her face turned a dark shade of red.

Ryūji was about to turn around to ask those people to mind their own businesses, but he was one step too late. "I-I can hold my breath. We don't need to practice that!" Taiga pouted as she puffed her reddened cheeks and said agitatedly.

"Let's skip this low-level practice."

"T-That wouldn't be right..."

"I said skip it!"

With a firm determination, Taiga made the first step forward. She let go of the poolside and grabbed onto

Ryūji's arms. Keeping her face above the water, she tried her best to extend her body and kicked her legs, trying to stay afloat.

"Pull me forward! I want to first let my body get used to swimming!"

"I see! Are you sure about this?"

"Yes! Just do as I say!"

Taiga roared fiercely in a manner akin to an actual tiger about to finish off its prey. Ryūji had no choice but to turn around and slowly pull Taiga's body forward.

"Bleh! Bleh!"

Half of Taiga's face went into the water, forcing her to close her eyes tightly while vigorously kicking her legs. Ryūji was still feeling skeptical, *Can you call this practice?* As she was holding his hands, Taiga was not floating at all. If he didn't hold on to her arms to support her, she would simply sink deeper, with the splashes from her kicks slowly diminishing as she went down.

"Bleh... Ahahahaha! It's working! I can do this! Swimming is too easy!"

Taiga is treating this as swimming already? She was obviously struggling, yet she still pretended she was happy, lifting her chin above the water and smiling awkwardly.

Ryūji remembered when he first learned to ride a bicycle back in first grade. Back then he had just started to ride without training wheels, and he kept on losing his balance and falling down. Seeing this, Yasuko told him, " Ya-chan will hold onto the bike and walk along. All Ryū-chan needs to do is step on the pedals, okay~?" She then held onto the back of the bike. When Ryūji tried again, with Yasuko supporting him from behind, he finally managed to move forward without falling. *Wow! This feels great!* Ryūji accelerated, and the bike continued forward... It wasn't until moments later when he suddenly discovered that Yasuko was no longer walking behind him. He had already managed to ride on his own, while Yasuko was many meters behind him... She had tripped just after setting off with Ryūji, and was upside down on someone's fence.

Ryūji thought to himself, *That's it. I'll do that! I'll gradually loosen my grip, and then eventually let go of Taiga's*

hands. She'll be going "Ehh? I can swim!" And I'll be praising her "Very good, Taiga!" I'll do just that once we cross that line ...

"Blublublublub!?"

"Whoa!?"

Although Ryūji only loosened his grip slightly, Taiga had already sunk completely into the water.

"Hey, you alright?"

"...cough, cough! ...w-what just happened... Where is this place? Who am I? And you are..."

Incredible! She's lost her memories! Just when Ryūji held his breath for the worst,

"You let go of your hand, didn't you? Traitor!"

She stuck out her arm and smacked it hard onto the water, creating a huge splash towards Ryūji's face. *Thank goodness! She's regained her memories.*

"Hey, wait a minute! You're floating!"

"Huh? What!? No way!"

In other words, Taiga, who was in the center of the pool, wasn't holding onto anything. She wasn't holding onto Ryūji, and her legs weren't touching the bottom, all the while keeping her face above the water. Upon making this amazing discovery, they both exclaimed,

"Wow! Amazing! I can swim!"

"We can win this!"

Just as they were about to make a high five...

"...it doesn't take a genius to figure out why..."

Bubble bubble bubble bubble... Like Poseidon emerging from the water, Minori appeared right behind Taiga.

She was carrying Taiga with one arm.

"...is this the land-lubber Taiga that Takasu-kun has dropped into the water...? Or is it that land-lubber Taiga...?"

It seemed like Minori had been supporting Taiga from underwater a while ago.

"Eh, this land-lubber Taiga."

Minori shoved Taiga back towards Ryūji, she then bubbled back into the water like Poseidon and swam off.

Just when Ryūji was wondering where she was swimming off to...

"Kyaa!? W-What!?"

"I must stay neutral no matter what! ...since I've already helped Taiga, I must also help Ami-chan as well!"

"Minori-chan? What's with you? Are you trying to be Poseidon or something? Stop that, that tickles!"

Ami was playing with the beach ball with Maya and the others when Minori grabbed her from behind. *Is she getting the wrong idea about helping?* However...

"As expected from Minorin to be impartial. A role model for an athlete!"

If Taiga says so, then I'll treat it as such! Ryūji stared at the dazzling skin of Poseidon while nodding vigorously in agreement.

"In any case, let's return to the poolside!" Ryūji grabbed Taiga's arm and began walking across the pool. Unfortunately, the classmates started murmuring again,

"Oh dear... Looks like she won't make it..."

"There's just no way she can win like that..."

"Swimming was never the Tiger's talent anyway..."

"She cannot compare with Ami-chan the mermaid..."

Taiga bit her lips while digging her fingernails into Ryūji's shoulders,

"D-Damn it!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"How can they say that!? They said I won't make it, saying I've got no talent... Ughhh... I quit!"

"Stop being so bothered by what they say!"

"I don't need you to tell me that! But I just can't take this! It's too demeaning! I'm out! I don't want people to see me like this!"

"Dammit... It's because they've all bet on Kawashima's victory... They want us to feel bad and force us to stop practicing..."

Looking around, they found the classmates that they were once so familiar with now were their enemies. To make matters worse...

"Hey! Aisaka! How's your practice going on? Working hard with Takasu, I see?"

Kitamura was cheering them on merrily by the poolside. Taiga couldn't help but moan softly, revealing a strange face, not knowing how to respond. This was understandable. For Taiga, the harder she worked, the more Kitamura would misunderstand her relationship with Ryūji... Besides, to the casual observer, Taiga was the one who started this duel for Ryūji.

Running out of ideas, Ryūji could only sigh,

"You're hopeless. We'll have to find somewhere else better beside the school swimming pool to practice, and let everyone eat humble pie when the fated day arrives!"

"Come to think of it, isn't there a heated pool in front of the station?"

"Yeah, we can go there."

Drip! An icy cold raindrop fell on Taiga's nose. "Cold!" "It's raining already?" The classmates muttered as they began to leave the pool.

Today's swimming lesson had come to an end.

"Firstly... we have Sir Arthur Conan Doyle running along as the Olympic Torch Bearer... Suddenly, a suspicious shadow appears! Hey, that's George Orwell! Oh no! The Torch's been snatched away! *Oh no you don't!* yells Conan Doyle, and begins to throw himself at Orwell , but Orwell casually dodges the attack, while spreading out his injured wings from behind..."

"What the hell is with that literary figure battle royale commentary?"

"Well, it'll be necessary, won't it? As soon as I win, I will instantly hold a public premiere of the stupid chihuahua's monomane medley DVD. Think of it as extra entertainment I have prepared for her for that day!"

"So which one would she be? Conan Doyle or Orwell?"

"Both. She'll be playing both roles... since she's got limitless potential in that department."

"R-Really?"

"I'm the one who thought of giving her those roles, after all!"

Full of expectations. Taiga was feeling unusually enthusiastic as she walked on the rain-soaked pedestrian road while waving her umbrella around. Ryūji was captivated for a while at the scene, but ran to catch up with her when he regained his senses. He was no less fired up than Taiga. Although they just had swimming lessons in the afternoon, they were able to go straight to the heated pool after having dinner. This was because of the powerful dryer in Taiga's apartment, which dried their swimsuits in no time.

As the sun set, the rain fell even harder. Every time Taiga swung her lavender-colored umbrella, the raindrops would sprinkle on Ryūji. While skillfully deflecting the sprinkling water with his own umbrella, he said,

"You've got to start practicing dipping your head into the water... Next you'll have to learn how to float and kick your legs with the help of a floating board..."

Ryūji recalled the swimming basics that he had learned back in swimming school when he was young,

and had earnestly thought out a training schedule for Taiga.

We've got time anyway. If we go to practice in the heated pool everyday, we'll be able to...

"Huh?"

Hearing Taiga's voice, Ryūji raised his head...and then went speechless.

"What? W-Wait a minute! ...you're joking, right!?"

The gate leading to the heated pool was locked. *We came all this way in high spirits, only for it to be closed?* When they looked towards the building, they were even more stunned.

Was it because of the rain? Or was it because of how late it was? All they saw were two bulldozers parked on both sides, and in between was a pile of debris covering the area where the pool was supposed to be.

"Huh...ehhhh!?"

Taiga screamed. Ryūji noticed something by his foot. Picking it up, he realized it was a sign, on it were words

written with a marker pen... After reading it, he could only stand numbly.

```
Thank you very much for your support. This
```

A library?

"Why the hell do they have to turn it into a library!?"

Taiga's voice reverberated throughout the dark streets. Hearing her yells, Ryūji felt his plan crumbling like the ruin and decay before his eyes.

Taiga can't dip her head into the water.

Taiga can't practice in the school swimming pool.

Taiga can't swim.

Taiga could lose...

If Taiga loses, I'll have to spend the summer at Ami's mansion. In other words...

In a room inside the holiday mansion, Ryūji was sitting on a sofa when Ami came in carrying a plate of fruits and wearing only her swimsuit. She boldly sat beside Ryūji's lap,

"Hee hee hee~ Does it matter? We'll definitely have lots of fun! Come, have some fruit~!"

"Say, ah~! These pears are harvested from our own gardens~ They're~ ripe~ already~! Try one and see!"

This is bad! Stay away from me! ...although he thought that way, he did not feel comfortable pushing the swimsuit-clad Ami off like that. So Ryūji had no choice but to obediently open his mouth. At that moment, someone else came in...

"Takasu-kun! You've gotta play with me! It's boring when Taiga isn't here! C'mon, let's play softball! What position do you prefer? First base? Second? Or... third...?"

Minori, also wearing a swimsuit, stood by the door. She wore a baseball glove on one hand while waving at Ryūji with her other hand. *This is pure bliss!* Driven by his basic instincts and desire, Ryūji prepared to wobble towards Minori when...

"Hey, Takasu-kun! You've got to stay and eat some pears with Ami-chan!"

"No way! Takasu-kun needs to run back to second base with Minorin!"

"You need to enjoy some tropical fruits together with Ami-chan!"

"You've gotta fly like a bullet with Minorin!"

Ahh! I can't, I can't! Someone is waiting for me... in that dim and damp double-room plus kitchen apartment... Besides, who's gonna cook the meals!? No good, I haven't even turned on the rice cooker, she must be starving to death already! Ryūji wriggled out of Ami and Minori's arms and rushed back to his second floor apartment, and opened the door. But it was already too late!

Lying on the floor of his apartment were three mummified bodies: Inko-chan, Taiga, and Yasuko. Yasuko had even written a final message on the tatami with her fingers: "Mom's starving" *What the hell!?*

"Hey...you look gross..."

"What...?"

"Your face! From just now you were suddenly laughing and crying at the same time! That's just disgusting!"

Standing before the entrance to the heated pool, now a pile of debris, Ryūji was brought back to reality. *That's right, that cannot be allowed to happen... No matter what happens, we've got to win this duel!*

But the problem was...

"Oh man, what are we gonna do!? Does that mean we have to go back to the school swimming pool to practice!?"

"We've got no other choice, haven't we? We're gonna have to adjust our attitude and ignore other people's gazes..."

"How am I gonna do that!? Kitamura-kun will be watching..."

Ryūji could find no answer for Taiga's simple question.

* * *

For the next two weeks, the rain never stopped falling.

During this time, swimming lessons were cancelled. Unable to practice, Taiga remained a land-lubber, though she no longer had to worry about having to practice in the school swimming pool.

"Stop raining already~!"

"At this rate, Team Takasu won't be able to practice, would they?"

Although it was daytime, the sky was unusually dark. The lighting in the classroom glowed pale white. The students were supposed to be having a swimming lesson now, but were now confined in the classroom, spending their free session in boredom.

Murmurs filled the classroom as everyone gossiped about how the duel between Taiga and Ami might not even take place.

"I feel so depressed..."

"Don't worry too much about it."

Taiga lifted her head from reading a sports magazine swimming special that was used to aide her in her mental training. Ryūji sat beside her like a coach,

"Right now, we can only rely on mental strength!"

He took out the previous magazine issue and showed it to a depressed Taiga.

"We're just reading magazines here. I still can't swim!"

"Better than having nothing to do. Besides, haven't you been practicing kicking your legs at my place?"

What Ryūji meant by practicing kicking involved placing a cushion on the tatami, and then having Taiga lie horizontally on top of it so her legs could kick freely in the air. "Good, very good! Kick harder! Faster! Wow! There's a new burger store in Asakusa! Mmm, that looks

delicious..." "Why on earth are you watching TV!?" "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!" The pain from the kick that Ryūji received on his back was evidence that she now knew how to kick her legs.

"That kind of practice isn't enough!"

"Didn't you practice in the bathtub as well?"

"Well...yeah... Those training should have some results ..."

Taiga beamed confidently from ear to ear. What Ryūji meant by practicing in the bathtub involved Taiga dipping her head into a tub filled with water, and holding her breath for as long as she could with her eyes open.

"I can now open my eyes freely inside the water."

"Amazing!"

"Heh, heh, heh. I can even hold my breath for up to three seconds now!"

"Hey, we can win this!"

Gimme five! The crowd (consisting of two people) attempted to spice up the atmosphere, and prepared to make a high five, but tripped as they missed each others palms.

"Man... This is boring... I really want to practice in a pool. Why did that heated pool close down!?"

"Yeah..."

The two came to their senses and sighed depressingly while looking at the ceiling. Someone whispered from afar, "Oh dear, wouldn't they be finished at this rate?" Hearing this, Taiga only twisted her lips and remained silent. She couldn't even be bothered to roar.

"Ha!"

"Whoa!? What the...? Oh, it's you."

Seeing some paper planes fly before their eyes, Ryūji quickly turned around, and saw Kitamura standing aside and smiling. *Crash!* A loud sound thundered beside him, and he realized that Taiga had fallen on the floor with her chair.

"What do you mean 'what the?' Well? How's the practicing? The duel with Ami is almost up."

"How's the practicing? ...we can't even practice in this weather, right, Taiga?"

Taiga blushed slightly and nodded lightly as she returned to her seat. As she attempted to adjust the position of her desk... "Whoa!" She ended being buried by the avalanche of sports magazines.

"I guess you're right. There's no way you can practice in this weather. I don't know if this would help, but think of it as a goodwill of mine."

"This...you mean those?"

Ryūji looked at the papers that just flew past him, and discovered those were tickets to the public swimming pool.

"My mom's an insurance agent, and those were supposed to be discount vouchers for her clients, but she got two extras, so you guys can have it! Actually, I've placed my bet on Aisaka winning this."

"Eh..."

Taiga widened her eyes and yelped, while looking surprisingly at Kitamura.

"When I saw that note that was being passed around and found Takasu very confidently wagered on Taiga winning, so I thought, *Alright then, maybe I'll follow suit.* Afterward, many people changed their minds and wagered on Aisaka. Takasu, you've got a huge responsibility on your shoulders now!"

Kitamura pushed his glasses and smiled genuinely. Taiga looked frenetic, and cleared her throat many times before saying,

"W-W-Wagered on... me? Does everyone think I can win?"

"Yeah."

Pop! As if having an allergic reaction, her face went even redder.

"How should I put this? Aisaka's the type that shows her potential when push comes to shove, so she'll definitely make a great turn-around. To use a superhero

description, she'd be Kinnikuman, and I don't mean Kinnikuman II."

Is that supposed to be a compliment? Ryūji scratched his head in confusion, but...

"Ah...you mean the prince...the main character...?"

Taiga lowered her very red face and smiled. *She looks really happy...*

"Yup. And unexpectedly, Ami's the type that screws up when it comes to the big occasion, so I think the result is far from decided."

"Can't you use them...this way instead?"

Ryūji handed one ticket to Taiga, and handed the other to Kitamura. Before Kitamura could react, Taiga had already widened her eyes,

"NOOO!!!"

Yelling in a strange voice, she intercepted Ryūji's hand and snatched the ticket he was about to hand to Kitamura, clutching it tightly to her chest. Seeming as though she was about to erupt, Taiga's face was

completely red as she glared fiercely at Ryūji. Seeing Taiga looking so embarrassed, Kitamura said,

"Well then, good luck! And hope it doesn't rain by then!"

There was no trace of unhappiness in Kitamura's smile , who raised one arm and waved farewell.

"Ahh...you idiot..."

Ryūji couldn't resist but gave Taiga's puffed up cheeks a soft playful punch. Taiga did not resist or complain, and allowed Ryūji's fist to stop on her face. She didn't even look at Ryūji as she remained silent.

Ryūji sighed and took away the swimming pool ticket she had been clutching tightly in her hands,

"You'll definitely lose it if it's left with you. The date on the ticket is for this weekend. It'll be great if the weather's fine... Man, I'm thirsty. I'm gonna go get something to drink, you want anything?"

Taiga simply shook her head.

"Wah!"

"Whoa..."

I've been through this before...

Two people, in breach of school rules, bumped into each other in front of the vending machines outside its permitted time of usage.

"Takasu-kun's skipping class~"

"You're in no position to talk."

Ami squatted alone by the wall and drank her milk tea . "Come sit over here!" After Ryūji had bought his iced coffee, she urged him to sit by her side.

"So you're all alone in this place? What an autistic girl you are."

"You too are in no position to talk~"

The two squatted shoulder by shoulder under the shadow of the wall. "Ah-choo!" Ryūji couldn't help but sneeze as he squatted down, causing Ami to giggle,

"Really. Are you tired?"

"Couldn't you tell? And just whose fault was it anyway?"

"Hmm? I wonder if you're referring to Ami-chan?"

"Of course. Seriously... Whenever you're up to some tricks, I'm the one that has to suffer."

"What tricks~? Ami-chan doesn't get it~"

"Why you... you can feign ignorance all you like! Keep on wearing that mask until your facial muscles go into spasms."

"Fu fu..." Ami's smiling face was in stand-by mode. She took off her innocent mask, and a pair of mischievous eyes appeared on her perfect looking face.

"You must be tired wearing that as well, huh?"

Spending time hiding in such a place during a rare free session... I think I can understand that. Ryūji couldn't resist lifting his can and tapped Ami's can. "Cheers." Ami's amber eyes blinked a few times in surprise,

"Eh?"

The next second, she squinted them, as though she had seen something interesting,

"How rare for Takasu-kun to be paying attention to Ami-chan. What is it, huh? Could it be that you got bullied by the Palmtop Tiger?"

"You talk too much... That happens often... Do you have any idea how many times I've been stung by Taiga's abuses ever since the day you tried to embrace me?"

Ami chuckled like a pigeon and said,

"Isn't that cute? A jealous tiger!"

"Cute my ass! Besides, she isn't jealous, she's just being pissed off by your provocations. If you were to do that to Kushieda, she'd be fuming as well."

"No, she won't. Are you an idiot? Do you really think if I tried to embrace Minori-chan like I did to you in front of that fellow, she'd treat Minori-chan with stinging insults as she does with you?"

"Don't call me an idiot... That's because you and Kushieda are girls! As well as friends..."

"Sigh... Alright, alright! You're the one who's right! 'I'm not jealous at all!' ...haha, you're really like her. 'Aren't you jealous?' 'No, I'm not!' ...both of you said the same things. Takasu-kun sure is funny!"

Ami softly tossed the can she had emptied, and it landed beautifully inside the dust bin. Not a single drop spilled out of the can, nor did it hit anything or bounce off the edge of the bin. Ryūji had no chance of showing off his specially prepared wet towel used for cleaning up the mess of clumsy people.

"This is not funny. Seriously, stop provoking Taiga with that attitude anymore. I'm the one that ends up getting the stick here! As for that mansion... I don't think you wanted to invite me at all. If you really win, have you ever thought of what to do next? I'm sure you'll just act as though nothing ever happened afterward! Since all

you wanted was just to drive Taiga insane, that's why you used me..."

Ryūji stood up, prepared to toss his can.

"What if I say I'm not going to pretend nothing's ever happened?"

The unexpected answer caused Ryūji to turn to look at Ami.

Ami remained squatted by the wall and smiled at him with her angel mask,

"Sorry, but I'm seriously thinking of winning this. And I'm genuinely hoping to be able to spend the summer vacation with Takasu-kun once I win. Of course, I also hope to see Aisaka Taiga make a fool of herself, but I'm more concerned about what to do after I win... What's with that expression? You surprised?"

Ryūji couldn't say anything... He could no longer tell whether or not Ami was joking as usual. Seeing his reaction, Ami remained smiling, and stretched out her tender finger, pointing to herself and Ryūji,

"I think it's interesting. Don't you think...that we're a match for each other?"

"AAs if!"

"Haha, look who's mad."

"Why you! There's a limit to messing around with people. And if you're done with your drink, go back to class!"

"I'm gonna stay here for a while longer... Shouldn't Takasu-kun be going back instead?"

"I don't need you to tell me that!"

She doesn't intend to go back yet? Ami waved farewell to Ryūji as he walked off. Even though she had finished her drink, she remained squatting in the gap between the vending machines...

Who knows, maybe she's actually a rather gloomy person.

* * *

"I suddenly realized, tomorrow's the fated day already ."

"..."

"The weather looks strange... Though it's not raining..."

"..."

"The weather forecast said tomorrow's a cloudy day, but..."

"Buwah! Ryūji did you see that!? Did you!?"

Nope, I was looking at the weather. Deciding not to tell her that, Ryūji simply gave Taiga a nod.

"Heh, heh, it's amazing, right? I must've held my breath for about ten seconds there!"

Taiga proudly puffed up her phony breasts. For some time, she had been holding tightly onto Ryūji while practicing holding her breaths by the poolside.

"Yeah, ten seconds already!"

Ryūji, on the other hand, sat by the side of the children's pool.

"Hey! There's a delinquent there!"

"No, Aa-chan! You mustn't go near those people!"

The housewife who brought her child trembled as she said that. This pool was supposed to be reserved for small kids and babies, so the water only reached Ryūji's kneecaps.

"Hey, Ryūji, do I look like I'm swimming?"

Taiga let go of her hands from the pool side and began crawling on the bottom of the pool like an alligator...

"Wah!?"

Her hands probably slipped as she submerged into the water, creating many bubbles. After splashing for a while

, she finally stood up. As she choked on the water and yelled non-stop...

"Oh no! Aa-chan! You can't do that!"

Aa-chan had taken out an elephant-shaped sprinkler and sprayed water on top of Taiga's head.

"I'm so sorry about this! You mustn't do that, Aa-chan! "

"Wah..."

Aa-chan finally got carried away by his mother. Taiga remained silent and walked towards Ryūji with an ambiguous expression,

"Even I wouldn't use violence against the innocent antics of little kids..."

A concession of defeat by the Palmtop Tiger... Now that's rare.

"As high-school students are not supposed to be in a children's pool, we are in no position to complain."

"Was that the reason why that kid was so pissed...?"

In this rainless Sunday, the public swimming pool tickets Kitamura gave them were finally put to good use.

Ryūji and Taiga arrived here in high-spirits after a 20 minute bus ride. Yet the sun did not appear, and the sky remained gloomy while the temperature had hardly gone up at all, meaning the swimming pool water was icy cold . Maybe as a result of these factors, there weren't many people today. The four main pools were as quiet as they could get.

"Taiga, let's go to the big pool over there! It'd be great if only they had slides..."

"There's the 'wave pool' as well, since the water flows like a river... Hey, are those people crazy?"

Taiga left a tiny footprint on the ground while laughing at the junior high students "meditating" under the "waterfall pool." Just when Ryūji was about to tell her that Kitamura had done exactly the same thing, he discovered something nearby that could be put to good use.

"Here!"

"Whoa!? Hey! What the?"

Ryūji had lopped a floating ring over Taiga's head. He found it lying on the ground, no doubt dumped by someone after they were done using it.

"We can't help it, can we? If you don't want to drown, you'll need to grab onto this. You can't touch the bottom, right? Come on, we'll go to the 'wave pool'!"

"This... is too embarrassing..."

Sploosh! Ryūji stepped into the round-shaped pool with one foot and jumped in. Trying not to trip over the floating ring, Taiga carefully entered the pool right behind Ryūji.

"Wah! M...my feet can't reach the bottom!"

Grabbing onto the floating ring that Taiga was wearing and drifting along in the flowing water, Ryūji said,

"Anyway, it's already too late for us to start practicing on freestyle. We'll just have to rely on floating rings or boards tomorrow..."

"No way! Oh man...that's just too embarrassing! ... why'd it come to this!?"

"Well, we don't have a choice, do we? If you say you're quitting because you can't swim, you'll just fall straight into Kawashima's plans! Besides, no one ever said you have to swim freestyle anyway. The competition method merely said "Any style of swimming," so I guess floating boards are allowed."

"Any style... Ryūji, does that mean we are free to choose any method we want?"

"Hey, quit it with that sinister looking smile! First try kicking your legs. Since there's a current in this pool, you should be able to move forward comfortably."

"Mmm..."

Ryūji gently pushed the floating ring. He swam forwards in breaststroke with his head above the water, moving along with Taiga.

"Like this?"

Splash, splash, splash, splash! Huge splashes were created. Now able to float, Taiga's leg kicking became

formidable. *Although this pool has currents, isn't she moving a bit too fast?* As Taiga continued to accelerate at breakneck speed, Ryūji could no longer catch up using his breaststroke, and had to start paddling his arms forward.

"Hey! Wait up!"

The splashes finally stopped. Gently using the momentum generated by the floating ring, Taiga floated while changing directions, and even looked at Ryūji, who was catching up, in disbelief,

"What now? Do I really swim that fast? Or is this normal for this 'wave pool'?"

"N-No, you really do swim fast, since I'm also in this ' wave pool...' Hey! Wait... I'm...out of breath..."

"Really? Then I'm going to start swimming seriously, and you're gonna have to seriously try catching up with me!"

Splash, splash, splash, splash! The powerful water kicking began once again, and Taiga's body quickly moved forward. *No one can swim that fast in a floating ring!*

"Are you kidding me!?"

She was so fast that Ryūji couldn't even catch up with just paddling his arms, and had to start swimming freestyle. All this time, he had been training her in something he was good at in order to get her to think highly of him, so there was no reason why he shouldn't have been able to catch up with someone in a floating ring.

"H-How is this possible..."

Taiga, giving it her all, swam forward along with the current. Gradually, the splashes she created grew smaller and smaller. Ryūji was also swimming at full speed, but just couldn't catch up with Taiga.

At this point, Taiga had stopped swimming, and simply looked back at Ryūji,

"You really are a useless dog! Does that mean I'm amazing? I may be able to win that..."

"Don't...get...complacent...! There's...a current...in here... after all...!"

Lifting his head above the water, Ryūji was already trying to catch his breath by the time he had caught up with Taiga and grabbed her floating ring.

"That's gross! Why're you panting like a pervert?"

"...I'm...out of breath...huff... Can't help it...puff... Oh boy..."

Ryūji now let himself drift along the current, while trying to get his breathing back to normal,

"Phew~ It's been ages since I swam with all my energy. .."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, As Taiga was about to open her mouth to say that, she found herself yawning, the tears coming out of her eyes trickled down with the water on her face. Ryūji found himself feeling relaxed, and looked dumbstruck at Taiga's tears.

After kicking the water and drifting for a while, perhaps it was the sound of the water or the effects caused by floating on the water, their minds became gradually soothed. They remained silent for some time, and allowed themselves to drift along the water.

"I feel like...I can just sleep like this..."

Taiga yawned a second time. Ryūji too made a big yawn. Looking aside, they saw a frail old man lying on a floating bed and drifting forward. Beside him was a kid who seemed to be his grandson, who wore a duck-shaped floating ring, swimming beside his grandfather.

In other words, no one in this pool was moving forward on their own. Everyone allowed the current to take them along, at a relaxed pace...

"Ah~ Looks like we've come to the quietest pool..."

"I really feel like sleeping now..."

"Me too..."

That was to be expected. He had woken up at seven just to look out at the weather. As they made preparations while watching the weather forecast, by the time he decided to leave his apartment, it was already eight.

Afterward, Ryūji had to prepare Inko-chan's meals, and had to look at his hideous sleeping face. He also had to take care of Yasuko, who came home drunk, and sat and wept while half-sleeping, though she didn't wake up in the end. He also had to go back home because Taiga had left her hair clip in her apartment... By the time they got on the bus, it was already nine. And by the time Taiga had changed into her swimsuit, it was already ten before they finally entered the pool.

Ryūji had a feeling that even before arriving at the pool, they had wasted quite a lot of energy already.

"How's the weather tomorrow?"

"It looks like it'll rain, and the pool will be closed."

Both of them opened their mouths dreamily, and held onto the floating ring while lifting their heads and looking at the slightly gloomy sky. Like a sleepy kitten, Taiga found even lifting her head to be bothersome, and lazily rested her face on the floating ring,

"I feel like...this is better... I think...it's fine like this..."

Taiga obviously looked exhausted. Ryūji understood that feeling very well too...

"Don't say that. Kitamura's placed his bet on you, after all! You must've been happy when you heard that, right?"

In an attempt to get Taiga motivated, Ryūji had used his only "spark," hoping to ignite her eyes with flames of passion...

"Umm..."

"What's with the 'umm'!?"

Taiga laid her face on the floating ring. Her eyes lacked focus as they stared ahead at the water. A drop of water fell from an eyelash, glittered then and dropped onto her tender wrist. As Ryūji watched that drop, he twisted his lips as he said,

"We've gone through a lot of trouble to come here. Even Kitamura's cheering for us. Isn't that attitude a bit wrong?"

Taiga did not respond, but instead, closed her thin eyelids, her long hair floating on the surface of the water. *Is she no longer concerned with winning anymore!?*

Without realizing it, Ryūji felt angry. He remembered what Ami had said to him before, "Sorry, but I'm seriously thinking of winning this. And I'm genuinely hoping to be able to spend the summer vacation with Takasu-kun once I win."

Drifting together with Taiga, for the first time, the thought of her possibly losing appeared in Ryūji's head. *In terms of determination, she had already lost!* Besides the natural disadvantage of being a land-lubber, not wanting Kitamura to see her work so hard for Ryūji's sake was another reason for her indifference. Perhaps Taiga does want to win, but unexpectedly, she had fallen into a trap of weariness.

If this goes on, Taiga might really lose. If she loses, then I...

"It's raining?"

"No way..."

Taiga raised her head as an icy cold raindrop fell on her nose.

As it was lunchtime, they decided to have some soba in the snack shop beside the pool while waiting for the rain to stop.

"Looks like everyone's gone home instead of waiting for the rain to end," Taiga said. She had stopped eating while sitting under the umbrella, still wearing her swimsuit.

"That's their problem. Once the rain's over, let's go to the pool without any currents."

"Hmm. Your lips are all green."

"Well, your lips are stained with seaweed as well."

Not concerned with the seaweed on her mouth, Taiga furrowed her brow and stretched her arms. Looking at the rain outside of the umbrella, she frowned even more...

"It's raining cats and dogs!"

"Looks like it won't be ending soon..."

"It's getting colder as well..."

Taiga showed her arm to Ryūji, "Look, I have goosebumps already." Her white skin revealed many tiny spots, evidence of how ruthless the elements have been to her wet skin.

"It'll be over if you catch a cold. Let's go back once you're finished eating, okay?"

Ryūji's suggestion was made out of concern for Taiga's weary expression.

"Going home already?"

Taiga gave an enigmatic expression, looking innocent like a child, mixed with a sense of dissatisfaction. She looked at Ryūji and said,

"You're getting goosebumps too, aren't you? Besides, my lips are getting pale. We can't go on like this."

"You may be right...but we still haven't practiced enough! We only drifted for a while just now..."

Taiga opened her mouth and slurped in the soba, stuffing her cheeks full. Ryūji looked at her stubborn face and thought, *From her hesitation, it seems like she's more inclined towards not going home.*

"Not going home? But it's getting colder now. Are you sure you still want to continue? Though I myself hope you can continue..."

"Yup, we'll continue. Though it's cold... I'm feeling hesitant...about many things...but I still want to try my best."

She really is hard to read. Ryūji tilted his head and then realized, *That's it! The spark of love from a while ago probably caught and started its magic within her...*

"You're right. Since Kitamura gave us these tickets, they contain his support for us. It would be a pity to just waste them like that."

Taiga's eyes looked upwards,

"That's not the reason! No, it's not. I'm working hard because... The reason I decided to continue is because... Forget it! Since it's useless trying to tell anything to a stupid dog like you!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing!"

Taiga violently closed the box of soba she had just finished, and tossed the plastic chopsticks aside. Ryūji had no idea what she was so pissed off about. All he knew was that her mood had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. Yet, Ryūji felt troubled by the mood swing that had come from nowhere. In face, Ryūji had found himself getting frustrated.

"I... I'm feeling unsure about this, do you understand? If I work hard for this sort of thing, Kitamura-kun's probably going to misunderstand our relationship again! But, but... I want to work hard, I want to! Because... because you..."

Ryūji and Taiga made eye contact. Under the umbrella in the gloomy sky, Taiga's eyes glared strongly.

Normally, Ryūji would accept this glare straight on. No matter what Taiga wanted to say, no matter what she was thinking, he was always thinking of how to get her to feel better again. The degree to which Ryūji spoiled and pampered Taiga was becoming almost pathetic. This was because Ryūji was already a hopelessly kind person to begin with. Sometimes he would treat Taiga, whom he shared a dining table with, as a sister or a comrade in battle, and he knew very well about Taiga's extreme clumsiness and inability to express herself properly.

Yet right now, he could not face that glare...

"It's got nothing to do with you!"

After saying this, Taiga, as she usually would, turned her face and glanced coldly at Ryūji out of the side of her eye. Ryūji was further infuriated for some reason.

Was it because it was getting cold? Or maybe he was tired? Could it have been because the soba tasted terrible ? Or had those shameful comments on the betting note damaged his pride?

Or could the reason be something simpler? He would always treat Taiga nicely, yet *every single time* Taiga would say, "Ryūji has nothing to do with me!"

"Ah... I get it now! Then forget it! Let's stop training... since you never gave a damn anyway!"

Perhaps it was because all these emotions had been buried within his heart for so long.

Hearing Ryūji's stiff voice, the intensity in Taiga's eyes changed,

"What is that supposed to mean? Who says I don't give a damn? Didn't I say I want to practice? Didn't I say I don't want to go home and want to continue?"

"Don't force yourself already, since I don't have anything to do with you, right? Why not just cancel tomorrow's duel if that's the case? What's the point in working hard? Besides, you can prove to Kitamura you don't give a damn about me! I'll go tell Ami and ask her not to bring him along. Kushieda won't be coming as well, I'm sure you'll be happy about that? You don't need to worry about anything anymore, isn't that great? You can always go buy boxed lunch sets in the convenience

store, or order take out from the Chinese restaurant outside the station during the summer!"

Taiga glared coldly at Ryūji, her eyes filled with anger,

"...say that again?"

"I meant exactly what I said! You don't need to practice , and you don't need to accept the duel! You happy now!? Kitamura won't be going to the mansion, and as long as your meals are sorted out, what else is there to worry about!? *You* have no right, as well as no reason to interfere with whomever I want to go anywhere with!"

"...yes, yes, you're right!"

A cold laugh emanated from behind Taiga's bloodless lips,

"So you've shown your true colors, haven't you!? If I had noticed it sooner, I wouldn't have to suffer so much like an idiot!"

"What's that supposed to mean!? Showing my colors?"

"You actually want to go, don't you? To Kawashima Ami's mansion? Don't make me laugh! You actually want

to spend the summer with cute girls, don't you? Well, that's understandable, since your vacation would be ruined if you were to spend it with me! If you so wanted to go, couldn't you have said so in the first place!? Or could it be... I see! You've been using me, haven't you!? You feel bad having to say it yourself, so you decide to use me as an excuse, and put on an appearance of 'Oh, I actually don't want to go, but I had no choice!'...are you an idiot?"

"You..."

How the hell did it come to this!? Ryūji's mind was blinded with rage. *Why did I check out the weather forecast with you every day? Why did I spend time training you to kick your legs? Why did I come here with you... And this little girl actually has the balls to say such stuff!? Have you gone blind!?*

"I REALLY don't understand what the hell you're thinking!"

"That ought to be *my* line!"

Taiga roared back, but Ryūji did not understand what she meant. This only made him angrier, and he continued in rage,

"You've always been like this! Always! Saying you don't give a damn about me, but deep inside, you've already jumped to conclusions and assumed I'm the one who's in the wrong! Why must you always be like that!? So what if I embraced Kawashima!? Why must I put up with your abuses!?"

"Why must you mention *that* again!?"

Taiga went ballistic as she turned the table over and stood up. She picked up the umbrella and threw it at Ryūji. The rain continued to fall. There was no one else around. Only the wind broke the silence by the poolside.

"WHY!? Tell me why? Why is it that you just don't get it? I was never mad! Haven't I been saying that since the beginning!? I was only feeling pissed off..."

Thud! Taiga placed her fist on her chest. Her voice was getting hoarse.

"...by people who think they know everything about what I'm thinking! That's all! What the hell is this about me being pissed about Ryūji!? What the hell is this me wanting to say Ryūji belongs to me!? To hell with that! What do you understand anyway? Just who can understand how I see Ryūji anyway? How could anyone

possibly ever understand!? I never even told anyone about this! I don't even understand it myself!"

Ryūji only heard half of Taiga's rants. He had fallen into the children's pool while dodging the umbrella Taiga had thrown at him.

"Cough, cough... What...did you just say!?"

"I said I'm quitting! You can go wherever you like for all I care!"

Ryūji watched from behind as Taiga ran back to the changing room, rubbing her eyes.

"Suit yourself! Moron!" Although he had said that, deep down, Ryūji still hoped, *Taiga's going to trip clumsily , and then lose something important, and then come over to ask for my help. I can sigh and say, "You idiot!" And everything will return to normal...*

Taiga never turned back. She took a taxi home by herself.

She didn't even come over for dinner, nor did Ryūji ask her to come over.

They seemed to have fallen out badly.

At eleven at night in the quiet Takasu residence, Ryūji faced the bird cage and said,

"I don't think I did anything wrong, did I?"

Like any other parrot, Inko-chan only chirped, and avoided contact with Ryūji's eyes...

Chapter 5

Ugh!

When Ryūji awoke from a bizarre dream, it was only five in the morning, and the sun had just risen.

After sleeping a night, he could still feel the anger burning within him, but it was no longer as intense as it was the day before. The flames were no longer searing hot, and only glowed as embers within his heart.

Maybe I was so angry that I actually woke myself up? Thinking about it he got even more peeved.

Scratching his head, he got out of his bed. After using the bathroom, he stood on the icy kitchen floor as he washed his hands in the kitchen sink... *Lemme check out the kitchen cabinet.*

He took out the high-class ham steak that Yasuko brought home the other day - he heard it was a gift from some customer. They had wanted to save it for a special occasion, which is why it was kept until now.

Might as well make a boxed lunch. I'm already awake anyway. Besides, if I don't keep myself busy with something, I

won't be able to calm down... Taiga and Ami's duel no longer matters anymore, nor does the weather, the pool nor the summer vacation... So, let's make lunch. Luckily, there's still some minced meat left. Otherwise I can always use the chicken legs. As for vegetables, there are onions, tomatoes, green peppers, mushrooms...

Ryūji mixed the ingredients with his hands as he prepared to make ham steak norimaki. After frying with oil and sprinkling on some salt and pepper, he added the sweet fried eggs as stuffing, along with rice and wrapped it up.

I'll have this for lunch! Ryūji was no longer concerned about anything. Just as he was about to open the refrigerator to get more ingredients, he heard the apartment door click open.

"Oh my~?"

Yasuko stuck her head in and exclaimed in surprise, smiling at her son,

"Why is Ryū-chan up so early~?"

Smelling of booze, she bounced around happily.

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to cook something for lunch."

Ryūji poured some barley tea into a glass and handed it to Yasuko, who finished it in one gulp.

"Ah! That tastes good~! Oh yes, have you and Taiga-chan made up with each other yet?"

"Not yet."

Ryūji honestly shook his head while chopping some onions... There was no need to put up a front for someone who was drunk.

"Really? ...come to think of it, this is the first time Ryū-chan has ever quarreled with anyone..."

"Yeah..."

It was as his mother had said.

It was quite embarrassing as well, because up till now, Ryūji had never seriously yelled at or argued with anyone before. Usually he would only get involved in minor disputes, or simply smile back begrudgingly at something he did not agree with. That was all. But this was really the first time he allowed his negative emotions to take over. Asking himself how he felt, he would say *This feels terrible!*

Sigh... Yasuko sighed as well.

"Why did you two start fighting anyway? And you guys even managed to get a chance to go swimming together..."

Yasuko sat on the kitchen floor, but this time, Ryūji did not complain.

"I guess... It's because Taiga said that she didn't give a damn about me... That's why I got mad..."

"So that's why... But Ryū-chan should understand, right? Taiga-chan's always like that... Not saying what she really means..."

The sharp knife had turned the piece of onion lying on the chopping board into many tiny pieces, irritating Ryūji's eyes and nose. *This is a really good piece of onion!*

"Taiga-chan's... already... hinted very clearly to you... Taiga-chan... likes Ryū-chan a lot... She definitely doesn't... want you to go out... with other people..."

I'll chop another one!

"Though Ya-chan isn't sure if Taiga-chan wants to go out with you. But... Ryū-chan~ She doesn't really hate you... She's the sort of person that wouldn't share a dining table with people that she hates, even if she was starving... That's what Ya-chan thinks..."

Yasuko's icy hands gently touched Ryūji's legs.

As though trying to transfer her power into him, she patted them, as though comforting a small child.

And then...

"Zzzzz..."

Her hands slid down onto the floor. She smelled of alcohol... As usual, Yasuko had fallen asleep from drinking too much.

"...jeez... She hasn't even taken off her makeup yet..."

Ryūji washed the onion pieces off of his hands, carried his drunk mother back to her bedroom, and laid her down on her futon, which he hadn't had the chance to tidy up yet. A nostalgic memory then hit him.

Yasuko smells just like usual... That fragrant and sweet smell surprisingly suits her well.

He still remembered when they lived in a place messier than this town. Whenever Yasuko came to pick him up, she would bring light to the gloomy child-care center. Ryūji would happily dash towards her, no matter how tired he might have been. "Ryū-chan! I'm so sorry!" Being hugged by Yasuko, he would smell that same sweet fragrance. Although it was a cold winter's day, that neck he held onto would be full of sweet-scented sweat. Even though she wore high-heels and a mini-skirt, she still ran all the way down to pick him up.

Although I occasionally forget, she really is my mother. Acknowledging this fact, Ryūji thought that even when he reached her age and began living alone, her words would still rouse his spirits.

Right next to his boxed lunch, he prepared another for Taiga. *I'm still annoyed by her and we are still fighting, but after hearing Yasuko say that, I guess I will make one for her too! After all, it's not often one can have such top-quality ham for lunch.* He had already gone through the trouble of preparing such a grand meal anyway.

...you say I have a mother complex?

Well, what's wrong with having a mother complex?

The cloudy sky was slowly drizzling.

"Taiga! Hey, wait up!"

Ryūji dodged the puddles and caught up with the lavender-colored umbrella. Under the birch tree path, Ryūji stood before her and said,

"I won't ask you to walk with me! ...I just want to give you the boxed lunch I made for you! You haven't eaten anything since yesterday, right? Breakfast is in a separate box, so you can have that when you get to school."

"..."

Although Taiga's eyes emitted an unspeakably strong glare, she said nothing. He couldn't tell whether she was angry as she was looking at his feet, but her cold expression made it seem as if she was staring at a rock that had gotten in her way.

Only the bag containing the boxed food which Ryūji held out occupied the space between them.

He took another step forward, approaching Taiga closer, and stuffed the bag into her arms. Drops of rain fell onto the back of his hands.

"It's raining..."

"..."

"I hope the weather will improve..."

Taiga momentarily looked at Ryūji, who was trying to think of something to say. He wasn't sure if he had anything to say to her, as they were still bickering. But since he had gone through the trouble to prepare food for her, he had to find some excuse to explain the contradiction of his actions, while at the same time not wanting her forgiveness...

"If it does...then you'll swim for me in the duel right?"

Huh...?

After he said that, he tilted his head in bewilderment. *Do I really want Taiga to take part? This...feels like... Since I've already said it...*

But, why?

Is it because I don't want to go with Kawashima to her mansion?

But wouldn't it have been easier if I had just refused Kawashima in the first place? Then the problem would be solved at once. She couldn't have forced me to go anyway.

Though having said that. I couldn't say it, and I didn't refuse her.

Why not? Why did I not refuse her, but instead want Taiga to beat her in a duel? Why was it anyway? Was it because everyone had dragged me in without my consent? Was it because no one gave me a chance to refuse? Was that why I used that as an excuse and said it was because everyone had disregarded how I felt and forced me into this situation?... The question is...what are my thoughts on this exactly?

Questioning himself, Ryūji swallowed the rest of what he was about to say.

"Ah..."

The food bag on Ryūji's hand was snatched away.

Taiga's eyes remained cold, but she opened her mouth and said,

"The boxed food has nothing to do with this, so I'll accept it. But I will never forgive you! *Never!*"

Closing her lavender-colored umbrella, Taiga shot a glare at Ryūji, causing him to wince.

"The swimming duel has nothing to do with me!"

Even if it doesn't have anything to do with you, it's not possible to have a duel in such weather anyway... By the time he was able to open his eyes, he was shocked by the sight before him, causing him to drop his umbrella on the ground.

A silver glimmer had appeared between the cracks in the clouds.

The summer sunlight shone through the clouds and straight onto his skin. The blue sky opened up in both directions, causing the droplets on Taiga's brows to glitter brightly.

* * *

"Well~ Since you're always in the PE office and rarely appear in the main staff room, that's why~ I've been thinking~ It would be fun if we can spend time chatting together! Why don't you join us in having a drink occasionally~?"

"Oh, I'm not really that good at drinking!"

"Oh~ then what do you normally do at night~? And during holidays? Could it be you've been spending time with your girlfriend~?"

"I take protein supplements! And I work out!"

"I see~! Hmm, very good~ I guess I should go work out as well~ Maybe I'll take some yoga or pilates lessons! "

"The gym is great! The equipment is great!"

"Don't they have some hot yoga lessons as well~?"

"They have strength training too! To build the muscles! And reinforce the body!"

"Well...building muscles...? I don't really..."

"I'm quite satisfied with my build! Look! It's great, right? How about that? This back! This shoulder! These legs! How about that?"

"Th...they look reliable... Is that what you call muscular ...?"

"Please say they're huge! Ha! Hmph!"

"T-They're huge."

"Say they're firm! See? Ha!"

"Firm..."

Koigakubo Yuri (29, single) shook her head and stood up. *It's no good, I can't communicate with him at all. I must have pushed myself on him too hard.* Haruta simply pointed at her and laughed,

"Haha! Yuri has left the stage! The poor lady..."

He sat with Ryūji under the long and elusive blue sky, and allowed the sun to warm their bodies up.

"By the way, where the hell are today's main characters anyway!?"

"Seeing as the weather's become nice as well..."

The dazzling mid-summer sun shone brightly above the heads of the students of Class 2-C, yet no one had immersed themselves in the swimming pool. Everyone stood in a single row beside the pool, while murmuring amongst themselves. "They're taking too long!" "Hey, how much did you bet? On who?" Even Muscle Kuro, their PE teacher, seemed to have noticed the students were holding some sort of activity, and quietly observed from aside while tanning.

Ryūji twitched his mouth as he sat with Haruta, Noto and Kitamura, and wiped the sweat on his forehead. Haruta jabbed his shoulder and asked,

"Hey, Takasu, is the Palmtop Tiger gonna come?"

"How should I know if she's coming or not..."

We had a pretty bad falling out yesterday, so she's probably not gonna come. Yet even if it was just to Noto, he could not tell anyone about this. The illegal betting within the class was being carried out in a frenzy, and by the time anyone had noticed, the odds between Ami and Taiga winning were now quite even. It was rumored someone had placed twenty bets on Taiga in one go, his reason being, "Because Takasu is very confident!" As it was Ryūji's fault that Taiga might forfeit the duel, there was no way he could tell them about that.

Hanging a whistle on her neck and sitting silently on the diving podium was Minori, who would be the neutral referee for this duel.

A roar suddenly came from one corner of the onlooking audience. "What's happening?", everyone wondered.

"Sorry about that! I had to tie my hair, so it took some time~!"

"WHOOOOOOOAAAAAAA!!!!!" The ground shook as everyone roared. *Is the the sound of excitement?* Ryūji stuck his head out to see what the commotion was about.

It was because Ami had appeared, jogging slowly.

With her hair tied in a beautiful braid, she arrived in her usual cute face and perfect figure, but this time...

"B-Bikini!"

"I will never forget what I have seen today for the rest of my life!"

...she was wearing an all black bikini.

A seductive looking cleavage, an area precariously supported by a small piece of triangular fabric, a seemingly well-endowed bust, an abdomen as beautiful as a sculpture's, and a tiny belly-button. Everything was exposed. *Ami has graduated from being an angel, and has evolved into a devil... A devil with serious looks and figure.*

"It's been raining all the time lately, so my swimsuit wouldn't dry. That's why... Oh, no! What's with everyone ? I'll get embarrassed if everyone looks at me like that! Is this against the school rules? I'm a bit worried..."

Ami's cheeks blushed bright red as she pouted in a concerned looking face. *Her swimsuit wouldn't dry? The last swimming lesson was two weeks ago...though now wasn't*

the time to pay attention to such detail... Like an idiot, Ryūji stared at Ami with his jaw agape, when someone suddenly said to him,

"That beautiful Ami-chan, she's gonna swim, right?"

"She's doing all of this for Takasu, right?"

"Why is it only Takasu!? Why, why, why, why, why!?"

"Why, why, why, why, why is it just Takasu!?"

"Ow, my ears!"

On his right was Haruta, and on his left was Noto. Surrounded by jealous glares everywhere, Ryūji cringed.

"Seriously, stop it you guys! Not even I know if there'll be a duel, okay? If Taiga doesn't come, wouldn't the duel be canceled?"

"Huh? The Palmtop Tiger's not coming? Why?"

"Don't ask me why...how should I know... She'd probably thinks it's too stupid or something! Since she never really did give a-"

"WHOOOOOOOAAAAAAA!!!" Another roar erupted on the other end, but this time, it sounded slightly different. "Now what?", Ryūji thought and turned around...

"WHOA!?"

It was the roar of astonishment.

"Goodness me! I thought the Palmtop Tiger was dressed in full armour!"

"No matter how you look, she just looks like she's wearing a bullet-proof vest!"

The one that had appeared...was Taiga.

Her hair tied in two buns, she wore a bikini...yeah, right. She wore the same deep-blue swimsuit as last time, padded with phony breasts inside. But what amazed the crowd was the variety of floating equipment she carried on her tiny body. She wore a fully-blown floating ring on her waist, and her armpits and elbows were stuffed with floating boards, tiny beach balls and air bags. In any case, she had grabbed anything that would help her float and put it on. There was so much floating equipment that one could hardly see her skin.

"Hey, are you seriously planning to swim in that?!"

Ami yelled at Taiga, who proudly lifted her chin and said,

"Why not!? Don't tell me you're gonna ban 'foreign objects' at the last minute?"

"Isn't that obvious!? You've basically surrendered by not being able to swim!"

"Oh really? Then how about you take off that swimsuit of yours? A swimsuit is also a foreign object, isn't it? You planning to swim naked? Wow, amazing! As expected from an expert! But I'm afraid you'll get arrested by the police afterward."

"What absurdity is this!?"

"Oh? Could it be... You're afraid that you might lose? Well, I can understand how embarrassing it might be if you lost to someone who couldn't swim... Yeah, I do..."

"Ugh!" Ami was so peeved she could say nothing, but she quickly reverted to her casual smile,

"Hmph, you can say whatever you like! Since you can't possibly swim wearing all that. At least it'll be better than nearly drowning like last time."

"Thank you for your concern, but shouldn't you be the one who should take care? Swimming accidents can be pretty scary, you know? No one can predict what might happen!"

"Hmph!" Both of them turned their faces away and ended their intense pre-match trash-talking session.

Minori stood up and said,

"Now then! Let us commence the 25 meters return free-for-all style swimming contest! First, let's have the passionate and fired-up Ami-chan say something!"

"Okay! Anyway, I'll swim as best I can! That's all!"

Everyone applauded generously, some boys shamelessly shouted from the poolside, "Ami-chan is super cute!" "Come on, Ami-chan!" "I love you!" "I'm serious!"

Minori continued on, "Taiga, you say something as well!"

"Alright, in that case, I'll make myself absolutely clear. You! The guy with the intimidating eyes!"

Surprised at suddenly being singled out in public, Ryūji jumped up. The finger Taiga used to point with had little flecks of seaweed... Looking closely, even her lips had some as well... *Looks like she did eat this morning's norimaki.*

"Don't be so conceited! ...I didn't take part in this race for you, I'm only here because this stupid chihuahua..."

"Who you calling a stupid chihuahua!?"

"...has the balls to wear such a ridiculous-looking bikini! I just want to teach her a little lesson and make her look foolish!"

"What do you mean by a ridiculous-looking bikini!?"

"*That* ridiculous-looking bikini you're wearing! This is the first time I've ever seen an idiot wear a bikini at school!"

"You got a problem with that!? It's cute this way!"

"It looks stupid!"

"You're the least qualified to say that when you're wearing all that!"

Taiga no longer looked at Ryūji with contemptuous eyes, but Ryūji's were now intensely fixated on her. It wasn't because he was trying to tear Taiga's swimsuit into a bikini with his glare, but because he was surprised once again - not because of the countless floating equipment, but because of the fact that she actually appeared.

Ryūji never thought that Taiga would compete. *Didn't she already say it? 'I'll never forgive you! The swimming duel has nothing to do with me!' Instead, she says she came because she couldn't stand Ami's bikini...*

Besides Ryūji, the audience gave Taiga's speech an equally generous applause as Ami's. "My income depends on you!" "Continue with your legacy of being the strongest!" "Fight!" "Master!!!" Though the style of the applause was different, the intensity of it still sent the mid-summer swimming pool trembling.

"That's enough! Silence, you foolish imbeciles!"

Afterward, both did their warm-ups as instructed by Minori, and then made sure they had splashed their chests with water...

"Now then... TAKE YOUR MARK!"

Like an athletic swimmer, Ami stood skillfully on the starting platform and bent forwards. Taiga, on the other hand...

"Hey...is the Palmtop Tiger intending to dive into the water too!?"

"Wouldn't it be better if she started inside the pool instead?"

"Don't force yourself!"

...even the audience was feeling uncomfortable...but Taiga remained standing on her starting platform.

Ami took a glance at Taiga, and giggled as though seeing a fool.

Seeing Ami's giggle, Taiga simply ignored her and turned her head away.

"GET SET!"

With the whistle in her mouth, Minori raised one arm. Everyone went dead silent. Just when Ami was about to propel herself off with her legs, Taiga suddenly pointed to her abdomen and said,

"Hey, there's hair!"

"EH!?"

BEEEEEP! A loud whistle was blown, and the match had begun. But Ami had raised her head due to being distracted by Taiga...

"Ugh!"

WHAT!?

Everyone widened their eyes in surprise, including Ryūji and Ami.

As the whistle was being blown, Taiga threw all her floating rings towards Ami. Seeing all the floating equipment flying towards her, Ami lost her balance on the starting platform and missed her chance at a perfect start.

The tiger had revealed her fangs. Her glowing eyes burned bright as she raised her hand, revealing a wooden blade. It became clear to everyone at once that all the floating equipment she wore was merely used to conceal that blade. In her other hand was the last floating board, which she used to charge towards Ami.

"HA!"

"Kyaa!"

Without any excessive noise, Taiga jumped high in the air to avoid getting hit back, and then gave her opponent a well-executed spin kick. Losing her balance, Ami fell head first into the pool, creating a huge splash. Taiga followed suit and jumped into the pool...

... And held onto Ami and struggled with her underwater... *Had they begun beating on each other already?*

"What's the situation?"

"Intense! This is way too intense!"

Amongst the yells and screams, Ryūji went numb... *Aisaka Taiga, just who on earth are you... For you to do such a thing... Is that really allowed!?*

Four pale white arms splashed on the surface, and then sank into the water again as they struggled with each other.

"BUWAH!"

Taiga was first to resurface, grabbing her floating board. She revealed a twisted smile that even the devil himself would flee at the sight of.

Ami was next to come out, but her eyes revealed a sense of shock. This was because on the tip of Taiga's wooden blade, which was lifted high in the air...

"Eh...?"

"I told you already. You should never have worn such a ridiculous bikini! It comes off as easily as this... You, and that swimsuit, are both stupid beyond salvation!"

...was the upper half of Ami's bikini.

"KYAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Ami's scream echoed across the heavens.

"WHOOOOOOOAAAAAAA!!!"

The roars of the men caused the ground to shake.

Ami covered her chest with her arms, but at the same time, tried desperately to retrieve her bikini. She was no longer concerned with maintaining her angel mask. But Taiga wasn't so stupid as to let her have it back.

"If you want it, come and get it!"

She swung her wooden blade, and the wet bikini flew in the air, landing mercilessly on the fence near their starting point.

"No way! No way! This is not happening!!!"

No matter how much she cried, the fact now was that with her arms covering her chest, Ami was unable to move at all.

Seizing this opportunity, Taiga quickly grabbed her floating board, and set off by kicking her legs at an incredible speed, far beyond the ability of any normal person.

"Awesome! The Palmtop Tiger's definitely gonna win at this rate!"

"That's too underhanded!"

"The one who'll rescue Ami-chan will be me!"

Seeing Taiga speed off, Ami's supporters could not simply remain silent. They all began to run towards the bikini in order to hand it over to Ami...

"Oh no you don't!"

"Though I feel bad for Ami-chan, I'm still going to have to stop you guys!"

Taiga's supporters too rushed towards the bikini from the other end. Both sides struggled as they attempted to win control of the bikini. When someone finally got their hands on it...

"Hey, hang on. I think I smell something!"

"Even if it's just for a moment, let me smell it!"

The boys forgot their original purpose, and began to fight each other over the bikini.

"It's time to join forces! Screw the bet! All we want is just to look at Ami-chan when she's like this, right!?"

"Yeeeaaah!!", roared some of the boys in agreement. They turned their eyes towards the pool and stared at Ami with her snow-white skin. Ami quickly ducked into the water and yelled loudly, "Give that back to me! You bastards!"

"Seriously, these perverts! Out of the way! Here, Ami-chan! Catch!"

"Good job, Maya-chan!"

Maya had dashed into the crowd of men and retrieved the bikini. Rushing towards Ami,

"Ami-chan! I'm on my way to help you!"

"I'm coming too!"

"Yeah right! Since the wager, the bikini, and Ami-chan's white skin all belong to me!"

"I'll be the one who'll trigger a special relationship event with her!"

"Noooo!!!"

The swarm of fools with their twisted thoughts all jumped into the pool with their own agendas. Minori blew her whistle hysterically and yelled,

"Hey! You guys there! Stop getting near the athlete! I'll arrest you for sexual harassment! Hey! Dammit! Listen to what people are saying!"

But nobody heeded her warnings.

"I've got Ami-chan's swimsuit!"

"Give it to me!"

"Ami-chan you alright? Are you hurt?"

"Kyaa! Stay away! Stay away! Stay away!!! I SAID STAY AWAY FROM ME! Which part of that do you goons not understand!?"

"A-Ami...chan...?"

"Did I...just hear...a scary voice...?"

"Oh my~ I wonder what that was~!"

The girls looked at each other, and all of them stood up in indignation, "Unforgivable!"

"You guys behave yourselves!"

"You bunch of perverts!"

As the girls tried to drag the boys out of the pool and away from Ami, another group of boys had jumped into the pool. "Time to join the battle!" "This party is too fun to miss!" "You come along as well!" Even Haruta and Noto had jumped in, pushing Kitamura in as well.

Standing dumbstruck by the poolside, Ryūji unexpectedly made eye contact with the main character, who was situated outside the brawl for the bikini.

Even in such a predicament, Ami still managed to find the mood to smile to Ryūji,

"Hee hee, wanna look~?"

"This idiot!"

She slightly moved apart her arms that were covering her bust... *She's actually still pretty much in control, isn't she ?*

Her black bikini flew behind her in the air like a strange-looking bird. "Hand it over!" "Don't let the guys grab it!" As if playing water volleyball, the girls elegantly passed the bikini back to Ami.

"Ami-chan! Here! Catch!"

"Great work! Thanks!"

The bikini had returned to Ami's hand. She quickly submerged into the water, and by the time she resurfaced , she had put back on the bikini. She wasted no time in anymore small talk, and set off to close Taiga's lead.

Everyone turned their attention towards Ami, except Ryūji, who was looking at Taiga. *Is Taiga swimming properly? Is she moving smoothly and not drowning? Is she gonna get clumsy again? Could she be troubled by anything?* Though he had such a fall out with her last night, he just couldn't help but be worried.

"Ugh!?"

Ryūji exclaimed as though choking on something.

Taiga was indeed beating on the water, but a second after Ryūji looked at her, her tiny figure suddenly disappeared into the water.

No one noticed Ryūji standing up and diving determinedly into the pool, swimming as fast as he could .

I only saw Taiga's hands beating on the surface, she must be drowning! But she's got her floating board, so how...!? Just why!? Ryūji thought as he swam, knowing he could only get the answers to his questions by asking Taiga himself.

"Taiga!? You alright!? How'd you manage to drown!?"

Ryūji tried to hold her up, allowing her face to come above the surface, but Taiga kept swinging her limbs vigorously. Although she was drowning, she still attempted to push off Ryūji's hands. Her face twisted in pain, while tears welled up in her red eyes as she seemed like she wanted to say something...

"Let me go! Get lost!"

"How can I possibly let you go like this!?"

"You talk too much! I hate... ow ow ow ow ow!"

"What's wrong!?"

"M-My leg's cramped up!"

"Well, this is payback for using dirty tricks!"

As Ryūji attempted to signal to Minori to cancel the match as Taiga could no longer continue...

"Leave me alone! I can still swim! Gimme the floating board!"

Although her face was already contorting in pain, Taiga coughed a few times in order to adjust her breathing. She then pushed off Ryūji's hand and grabbed on the floating board, barely managing to kick the water with her cramped right foot.

"Y-You still want to continue!?"

Taiga's glittering eyes only looked forward,

"Yeah!"

"But you..."

Didn't you say it's got nothing to do with me? Haven't you already said this is just to make the 'stupid chihuahua' look foolish? If that's the case, then haven't you already made her look foolish enough? Taiga looked menacingly at Ryūji's speechless face,

"You happy now!?"

"Wha...?"

"Don't 'wha' me! Your master is working hard for you, so you ought to look happy for a bit! You stupid dim-witted dog!"

Continuing forward, Taiga no longer had any strength left to talk. Without hesitation, Ryūji grabbed Taiga's waist and said,

"Then go! It's fine if you want me to wag my tail or whatever!"

He thrust Taiga forward. Using the momentum, Taiga once again kicked the water and swam forward. However, an unexpected accident happened...

As everyone became embroiled in the battle for the bikini, they were now all inside the pool, engaged in a messy brawl. There were splashes everywhere created by people either jumping in or being pushed into the water.

While Taiga sped on ahead, Ryūji ended up being pressed into the water by the crowd.

"Eeeh!? R-Ryūji!?"

"Blublublub..."

Not knowing whether his head got hit by someone's elbow or knee, Ryūji felt himself losing strength... He knew he was sinking... The last thing he saw was Taiga making huge splashes and turning around towards him, looking at him with those huge round eyes of hers. Ryūji felt the shouting around him had become even more intense, as well as knowing that no one had noticed him.

"No way! Ryūji! Ryūji!!!"

Taiga's voice was becoming faint, while he was losing his breath... Or not, as he could now breathe again.

His motionless body had been forcefully lifted and placed on the floating board. That's how it seemed to him anyway.

"Somebody! Help! ... Anyone! ...Cough! ...Cough cough ! Dammit---!"

The tiny hand that held onto him seemed reliable, but his arm was completely paralyzed and his vision blurry. *Is this what they call a concussion?* Although he knew of such a thing, it didn't really help to change anything. He could only rely on that hand clinging him onto the board. He couldn't even lift his head up.

Ryūji slid from the swinging board back into the water , and drank the icy pool water... As he was about to drown, a tiny hand grabbed him tightly on the neck, and warmly held onto his chin. From his skin touching the water, he could sense himself moving slowly forward.

Barely able to open his eyelids, the scene he saw was even more amazing than the swinging that he had felt, as the first thing he saw was...

"Sob..."

Taiga was crying. Even so, she would not let go of her hand on Ryūji's neck. Even when she herself was close to sinking, she still clung desperately onto her floating board, wading towards the finishing point. Even when it came to this, she was still unwilling to surrender. Even though she was crying like a child, she wouldn't give up without a fight.

Yet behind them there was something that was moving at a very fast speed... much like a dolphin. Someone yelled, "Why is Takasu now racing together with the tiger!?" "Whoa! Overtaken!" "Takasu, you bastard!" "Come on! Ami-chan!"

No matter what anyone said, Ryūji, only semi-conscious, could not respond. He knew the dolphin had sped past them before his eyes. Under the hoarse, cheering voices, Ami had swum past the clumsy floating board duo with relative ease.

"Finish! Justice prevails!!!"

Ami seemed to have said something.

At the same time Ami said that, the tiny hand holding onto the board also lost its grip. The cheering had only begun when it stopped again. Someone said,

"...are Takasu and the tiger drowning?"

Yeah.

We're drowning.

Or to be more precise... Taiga, whose leg was now more painful than before, had used her last ounce of strength to place Ryūji onto the floating board as she slowly sank into the water.

"NO WAY!?"

Ami yelled in dismay. *SPLOOSH!* Something large had dived into the water. It was very huge, and very firm ...

Muscle Kuro was faced with a huge crisis as a PE teacher.

"Cough... cough cough cough!"

Being dragged to the surface, Taiga knelt in pain on the ground and coughed.

Beside her, Ryūji still remained in a state of semi-consciousness as he lay on the poolside, not even moving a finger. Voices could be heard from afar,

"Is Takasu alright?"

"He's still breathing!"

"Good, let's take him to the school clinic!"

No, I'm fine... My lungs have finally inhaled some fresh oxygen, so my blurry mind has become quite clear now. Ryūji attempted to move his elbow to motion to everyone not to worry about him...

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!!!"

Slightly opening his eyes, he saw something he did not expect - Taiga's hair was standing up, her eyes were bloodshot. She actually looked as threatening as a tiger as she crouched over Ryūji.

"You idiots, you idiots, you idiots, you idiots! ALL OF YOU ARE IDIOTS!!! Why didn't anyone notice? Why didn't anyone come help? Stay away you idiots! Idiots! IDIOTS!!! Get lost! I hate you! Back off, back off, BACK OFF, YOU MORONS!!!"

She had gone ballistic. Though her muscles could hardly compare to those of Muscle Kuro, who retreated backwards, the girl known as the tiger had gone ballistic. "ARRRRRGGGGGHHHHH!!!" Giving out an angry roar like a wild beast, she yelled while crying tearfully,

"RYUUJI IS MIIIIINE!!! NOBODY TOUCHES HIM!!!"

The students of Class 2-C were silent.

The mid-summer pool was devoid of any sound.

The sunlight shining from the blue sky was scorching hot.

"...hmm...? Eh...?"

Taiga finally noticed the meaning of what she had just exclaimed...

Let me just pretend for a little longer! Ryūji gave up on thinking and shut his eyes tightly, throwing away all thoughts.

But Ryūji just could not pretend to be completely unconscious, since he was smiling. *I'm glad.* That was how he really felt.

I feel really glad, hearing Taiga shout that. And then... yeah, I've always been glad all along...

Whether it was Taiga grabbing my hand and hiding me behind her back...

Or not wanting me to go to Ami's mansion...

Or saying she'll practice hard even when it's raining...

As well as getting mad when she saw Ami and I embrace each other.

Although I never realized this until now, it was more satisfying than anything else. I was very angry when Taiga said she didn't give a damn, and got into a fight with her as a result of that. But now, I can finally smile.

You said I ought to look happy for a bit, right? Well, Taiga, I am happy... All along, from the beginning until now, I've always been...

"Yikes!"

"T-Takasu seems to be up to no good!"

"Let's get outta here!!!"

* * *

"Man, that was hell!"

SMACK!

"H-Hey! ... You alright?"

Taiga had suddenly smacked her head onto the table. She only revealed two sharp eyes as she glared murderously at Ryūji,

"How can I be... *alright*!?"

Her deep voice carried a tinge of depression... Even the Palmtop Tiger had been battered badly by the two-week end of semester exams that had taken place right after

the last swimming lesson, though the true reason was the psychological damage that she had suffered as a result of the event.

Both Taiga and Ryūji were now resting on their usual sofa seats in the non-smoking section of the family restaurant that they frequented. It was already noon when the end of semester ceremony had ended. There were hardly any customers, probably because it was a normal weekday.

Not concerned with the gazes around them, Taiga lifted her feet like a child and admonished Ryūji, who sat opposite her,

"This is all your fault, you stupid dog! I wouldn't have gotten into so much trouble if it weren't for you! Now pass the menu!"

Unable to respond, Ryūji could only obediently hand over the menu.

Maybe I did get Taiga involved in so much trouble. This was all because of that declaration. Everyone heard Taiga proclaim "Ryūji is mine!" This lead everyone to be absolutely convinced that Taiga and Ryūji were now officially a couple.

No matter how hard Taiga tried to deny or threaten her way out of it, she just could not get everyone to think otherwise. Even Kitamura and Minori said jokingly, "You two have a long way to go!" "So, you've finally admitted it, haven't you?"

"May I please take your order? Hee hee, it's only noon and you two are already so lovey-dovey!"

This voice...

"Minorin! Stop that! Haven't I told you to stop mentioning that!? You're so mean!"

"Sorry! Sorry! I was just kidding! So don't cry!"

Minori had arrived at work early, and had already put on her orange waitress uniform, but was now cuddling Taiga's head with the tray she was carrying. She then looked at Ryūji and said,

"Oh dear..."

"You were the one that made her cry!"

"Did I? Nyaha!"

"Don't 'nyaha' me! Get back to work!"

...just kidding. Ryūji and Minori's friendship had developed to the point where they could fool around in their conversations.

Ryūji looked at Minori's smiling face and thought about how dazzling she looked. He knew he couldn't look directly at her, but...there were voices in his heart telling him that he no longer just had a simple crush on Minori... *No, it's still a crush, but...*

The reason for those voices was the little fellow pouting before him, reluctantly allowing Minori to pat her head. Ryūji had been troubled ever since the incident at the swimming pool.

First, it concerned himself. Ryūji was really happy at Taiga's "Ryūji is mine" declaration. He was so happy that he could not hide it, because it was real. Yet there comes a blind spot with feeling, and that is... *I like Taiga. If I didn't, I wouldn't have taken care of her. After all, I was the one that said "the dragon is the only beast that can stand equal to a tiger"...*

But this feeling of liking people, it's not limited to romance between a man and a woman, is it? Like friendship or family, aren't there many types of feelings for liking people? So our feelings for each other must belong to one of those! So this is just me being fond of Taiga, and that is good. After thinking on his own, he made his own conclusions. *So it's good this way... the question now is, what about Taiga?*

How did Taiga feel when she yelled "Ryūji is mine"? Could it be...could it be... Ryūji continued to be entwined in thought, and ended up getting so worked up that his stomach roared on its own while he shook his legs non-stop.

"Hey! Didn't I say stop shaking your legs!? You impoverished dog!"

Some other customer shouted from afar, "Excuse me! Can you take our orders?" Minori quickly rushed over and left the two of them behind.

"What is wrong with you...?"

Taiga's voice sounded more and more unpleasant.

"Huh!?"

A bizarre atmosphere emitted from this magical space where the two of them resided alone.

"You were looking at me, right? Well? What now? You got a problem with me?"

"N-No! ... I wasn't looking at you!"

"You *were* looking at me, you pervert! Staring at me like that in broad daylight, God knows if you were having some unspeakable fantasies..."

"What the hell are you imagining!? Just how did you come to such conclusions anyway!?"

"..."

"Stop ignoring me!"

Ryūji's yells were mixed with his wavering as he stood up. At that moment, two familiar faces entered his field of vision. "Hey! Kept you waiting, huh?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Takasu-kun! Oh, might as well greet this little midget here too. Sorry to keep you waiting as well!"

Four people now sat together. Ami sat beside Ryūji, and inevitably, this meant that...

"What's wrong, Aisaka? Why are you gulping down your water so quickly? Don't they have drinks where you can get unlimited refills over there? It'd be better if you order that."

Kitamura sat beside Taiga, who quickly turned her head away and began gulping down her water, not daring to look over. *Clink!* The ice at the bottom of the glass fell on Taiga's face.

"Ah! Ah!! AH!!! Taiga! It's spilling!"

"Ugh..."

Water dripped from her chin like a child. Ryūji quickly took out his handy handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the table, making sure every surface where Taiga's elbows could come into contact with was completely dry. *There!*

Very good! Ryūji nodded approvingly to himself. Beside him, Ami began to pout and lean on Ryūji's arm,

"Takasu-kun, why did you call me out here? Ah, could it be about going to the mansion? If it's that, we can always find a day where we can spend all day planning our trip..."

"The one who called you out was *me*! You stupid chihuahua!"

"WHAT!?"

Taiga turned her whole body 90 degrees to the right, while avoiding contact with Kitamura on her left. Although the left half of her face was swiftly dyed in a hue of cherry pink, she opened her mouth and said,

"What I'm saying is, I too will be going to your mansion. I... I lost the duel, so Ryūji has to go, right? But if that happened, there would be no one to take care of my daily necessities, and that would be troublesome for me! Although Ryūji's mom can take care of herself, she doesn't have time to look after me as well. So, while I'm very reluctant and wary, I'm still gonna come with you guys! So that's decided!"

"What!? Wait! Hearing you talk non-stop, Ami-chan's getting confused... What!? Why are *you* coming?"

This was actually Kitamura's request. He too wished Taiga could come along to Ami's mansion and have fun together, but it was going to take a lot of convincing for Ami to bring Taiga along.

According to Kitamura's reasoning, *If I come, and Kushieda comes as well, wouldn't you too have wished we could all spend this great chance to have fun together as good friends?* But Ryūji and Taiga were not aware of his real intent. Besides, for Taiga, this was a great chance to go traveling with Kitamura. Holding back her discomfort and suspicions, and after making a few concessions, she agreed to Kitamura's request on one condition - If Ami refused outright, then the deal's off.

Kitamura happily pushed his glasses up, and spread out his handmade calendar, which was drawn freehand on a sheet of looseleaf paper, on the table.

"Right! Let's decide on a time! Here, I've got a field trip with the Student Council, here's the field trip with the softball team, and here's the practice match..."

"Y-Yūsaku!? How can you just decide on your..."

"Hey, Kushieda! You free right now? We need to decide on a date for our trip!"

"Oh, lemme see, lemme see! Hmm... Here I've got club activities with Kitamura-kun, here as well, and here I've got work shifts, so sometime over here would be great!"

"I don't have anything special planned, besides sweeping some graves. Taiga, you're the same, right?"

"Nope. And I'm not going on any stupid family trips, not that I want to anyway."

"This means, sometime this week..."

"W-W-W-Wait a minute! What's with this spontaneous reaction? This is *my* family mansion! Why are you all deciding all this on your own!?"

Ami yelled while snatching Kitamura's calendar off the table. Taiga looked up at Ami, whose face was red and flustered, and said with her usual soft and deadpan voice,

"Is it too small?"

"Wha!? How can it be *too small*!? My parents make plenty of money, after all!"

"Ahh... So is it because you don't want people to see how run down the place is?"

"Of course not! That place is very spacious, beautiful, and it's got a great view! Much, much better than your apartment!"

"Then I've gotta come have a look!"

"Wha..."

"You're fine with that, right? Let me have a look, I want to see as well."

Momentarily dumbstruck, Ami was unable to say anything,

"Why...you..."

She had an unpleasant expression on her face... Ami the Angel was now nowhere to be seen. Sitting roughly on the sofa, she tossed the calendar back on the table and said,

"Alright... I am confident of it after all, so you'd better not be intimidated by my uber gorgeous mansion... Besides, no matter how I try and stop you, you'd still find some way to come anyway, right?"

Taiga opened her lips slightly, and whispered, *Alright!*

Kitamura smiled widely, and muttered to himself, " Ami, looks like this summer will be quite fun!" It wasn't known whether Ami pretended not to hear that or if she really didn't hear a thing, as she said nothing.

While everyone went back to deciding on a date to go, Ami smiled and said,

"Ah... So that's why..."

Normally, one wouldn't recover their spirits so quickly after suffering such a set back. This showed that Ami was no normal person.

"Aisaka-san, could it be because you're uneasy with being separated from Takasu-kun? Isn't Ami-chan right? You're scared that Ami-chan would snatch him away. That's why you came up with such a move, right? After all, you did say 'Ryūji is mine'... Right~?"

Uwaah! Crap! Ryūji quickly looked at Taiga. *Right now, Taiga had basically suffered a jump toss wrestling tackle, how could she come out unscathed!?*

Yet...

"You're right, let me first make this very clear!"

When Taiga lifted her head up, she looked unexpectedly calm. Lifting her chin and straightening herself up, she seemed like she was speaking not just to Ami, but to everyone else. She calmly said,

"That...how should I put it? What you just said... I can't deny..."

Ryūji's reaction was, *What's with her!? What's she trying to say!?*

"Yes! I admit it! A while ago when I saw the stupid chihuahua cuddled with Ryūji like how she's doing now... That really got me mad..."

Minori, who came over and heard Taiga make this confession, nearly dropped her empty tray. Kitamura merely pushed up his glasses. Ami, who started this conversation, held her breath.

Such a serious expression. Looks like Taiga's about to say something earth shattering.

"Ryūji is mine... Haven't I already said that? I can't ask everyone to pretend that never happened, because that's what I really think. It's true...but, well, that's because..."

Taiga closed her eyes silently and crossed her arms before her chest. Everyone remained speechless, while Ryūji felt like his heart was about to burst.

What now? Does she intend to settle everything right here right now? She doesn't really have to do that, does she? Shouldn't she find a more normal occasion, with just two people...

Taiga opened her eyes and looked straight into Ryūji, whose discomfort had reached its peak. Her obsidian eyes glittered beautifully under those attractive eyelids... And then, her rose-colored lips said without hesitation,

"That's because Ryūji is my dog."

"Eh...?"

"Because he's my dog, so he can go wherever he wants with whomever he wants for all I care - that was what I thought anyway. But that wasn't entirely true. As his master, if I ever saw my dog getting all excited with some strange hag I've never seen before, or fawning over someone else's waist, I would feel horrible!"

Ryūji nearly slid from the sofa. *Was it sadness? Or relief ? Or... Ah, forget it! Screw that!*

"What's with that face? Just what were you expecting anyway?"

Hmph! Taiga looked coldly down towards Ryūji as she did to the rest of the world, her rosy lips which had turned people's lives upside down smiled evilly.

"What face!? I wasn't expecting anything..."

Ryūji got back on the sofa and went back to looking at the calender. *Summer vacation begins tomorrow, so might as well forget all this useless stuff and have as much fun as we can!*

Although I'll still have to spend most of the summer with her, I guess I can still keep the peaceful daily life I like this summer.

Something icy touched Ryūji's elbow. Ami's finger had touched him under the table.

"What now?"

Ami didn't turn her head, but looked forward and smiled. She whispered in a low voice, "Too bad I can't spend time with you alone... But, there might be a chance !" That cheek of hers remained collected and pure, not showing any trace of her devious nature. No one had noticed Ryūji looking surprised.

"Very well then! We'll leave on this day then!"

Everyone applauded and agreed with Kitamura's conclusion.

And so, the first semester of Takasu Ryūji's second year of high school had come to an end.

Author's Notes

Lately, I've been hearing people raving about those fortune-telling websites, so I decided to try one myself. The fortune I got read "You're an exceptionally dense person. Once you see food you fancy, you'll end up eating only that." Wow, how accurate. Hi guys, this is Takemiya here!

Everyone that I've met has said to me that I'm going to get poisoned someday for eating cod spaghetti all the time. Even my fortune telling has foreseen it! So now, whenever I'm having cod spaghetti, I try to have it with a side dish as well.

...and that dish would be frozen fried chicken nuggets. I usually can eat up to four (after heating in the microwave for two minutes), but as every packet contains 17 nuggets, I get to have five nuggets on every fourth meal.

I always look forward to the meal where I can have five nuggets. I would even get up early on that morning and think, "Hey, I can have five today!" That thought alone is enough of a reason to get out of bed... Vegetables ? Nope, don't have any...

By the way, the amount of spaghetti that I eat does not decrease just because I've added a side dish. Since it's hot lately, if my appetite decreases, I'll get too thin, and then it'll affect my work.

As a responsible person, I must take good care of my own body, which is why I have meals meant for two people.

To everyone who has read *Toradora!* Volume 3: thanks for reading till the end! Did you enjoy it?

Unlike previous volumes, the focus this time is on breasts. For me, this came a bit unexpectedly...anyway... There's still plenty of ammo for the hips for my romance novel, not to mention I'm still not done with the breast ammo yet, so I must spare no mercy in firing them in my future novels.

I hope everyone has liked my story, and I hope you would continue supporting me!

By the way, I wonder if any readers out there were wondering whether or not I could swim? Well, I actually can. Or to be more precise, at least I don't sink. Even

when I'm not making an effort to swim, when I relax my body, it floats on its own! And you can forget about me scuba diving, since my butt would always float upwards, and you'd see me in an awkward position with my head downwards and my feet upwards.

For someone whose existence is hardly solid, I have been completely addicted to the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing*. Right now, my right hand is holding a fork and stuffing my face with spaghetti and chicken nuggets, while my left hand is on the console controller... I was just kidding... I hope I was kidding.

As I'm usually playing video games now, I'm lacking exercise now more than ever. But in the game, I've been using up a lot of energy, running around the village catching insects, fishing, digging up fossils! I'm sure that's more than enough exercise.

However, because I got too into the game, my already stiff shoulder and painful waist got even worse. My masseuse, who I visit often, told me, "Your shoulder's frozen (and it's getting even fatter)." I was wondering why I couldn't lift my arm. No matter how many

soothing massages I get, my shoulders would still revert to its worst condition. I usually reply smiling, "Maybe I've been playing too many video games." My masseuse would then sigh as a result of my response... I can't even remember how many times this scene has repeated itself already.

For someone so obsessed with the game, I just can't figure out how to interact with the animals in the village... "Hey~ Yuyuko! Can I have a ###?" I usually can't bring myself to turn down the animals' sudden requests for help, so I'd spend lots of time searching for those items. After some considerable effort, I gave what I had finally found to them, and they would usually smile cutely and reply, "Wow! Thanks! As expected from Yuyuko!" Afterward, they would chuck it in the dustbin the following day, leaving me feeling a bit hurt... Although they were the ones who had lost it in the first place, the following day, they still come to me and ask "Hey~ Yuyuko! Can I have a ### (the exact same item)?" What the hell!?

...after getting frustrated with the game, I decided to try something different, which is what I'm playing now - mental training.

First, they'd test your mental age through voice recognition, so I have to answer the questions that they ask using a microphone. You're all probably thinking that I'm now depressed because my mental age was determined to be very old, right? Wrong!

I don't know whether it was because I spoke too softly on the mic, but the machine just couldn't determine my results.

I guess that's about right... Since I've hardly spoken to any real people lately... maybe I've even forgotten how to talk...

A-Anyway! Might as well go back to the village to catch some insects! In this world, even with a frozen shoulder, you can still swing your insect net around...

--- And so, thanks a lot for staying around till the end! Serious! Stay tuned for Volume 4 of *Toradora!* and I hope you'll like that as well! I'd also like to thank everyone who has written to me. I've already carefully read every letter together with my editors, though there were so many it took like forever to read them all.

Also thanks to Kurafuji Sachi-sensei for her manga adaptation of my other work *Watashitachi no Tamura kun* on *Dengeki Comic Gao!*, as well as his guest illustrations and thoughts in this volume. I hope to work again with you in the future!

Finally, much thanks for the hard work of Yasu-sensei and all the editors. Let us continue to work hard, and make full use of our breast ammo reserved for romance novels!

Takemiya Yuyuko